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.....  
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DEGREE FOR WHICH THESIS WAS PRESENTED.....M.A.....  
YEAR THIS DEGREE GRANTED.....1979.....

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

SHOPLIFTERS IN BIGSTORE

by



NEIL MORGAN WARNER

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND  
RESEARCH IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

IN

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

SPRING, 1979



THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Shoplifters in Bigstore" submitted by Neil Morgan Warner in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts.



## ABSTRACT

This study looks at shoplifters. Shoplifters steal goods from retail outlets while masquerading as lawful patrons. Evidence suggests shoplifting is a common and costly form of thieving.

The study's sample consists of 611 persons apprehended in an urban department store ("Bigstore", as we shall call it) in Edmonton, Alberta, during the years 1975 through 1977.

Demographic and behavioral characteristics of the sample are analyzed. The major findings are:

- Shoplifters are disproportionately young (15 to 19 years), male (60 percent), and from a working-class background.
- Most shoplifters are petty thieves: 85 percent had an item or items worth less than \$50.
- Shoplifters in Bigstore appear to be amateurs who steal goods they might normally buy. Females steal female clothing while males steal male clothing, for example.
- Juvenile shoplifters more often steal while with other persons.
- Indian, Eskimo, and Metis shoplifters may be over-represented in apprehensions. These persons may be disproportionately prosecuted as well.



Findings in addition to those above are presented. The analysis also includes documentation of problems and drawbacks associated with the study.





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my thanks to the many people who contributed to this thesis:

To Dr. Gwynn Nettler, an exacting scholar and a gifted teacher, to whom I owe so much.

To Dr. Robert Silverman, Dr. Richard Baird, and Dr. Michael Gillespie for their comments and suggestions.

To Bigstore's security staff and management for making it all possible.

Finally to my wife Barbara, an inexhaustible source of encouragement and support.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>		<u>PAGE</u>
ONE.	INTRODUCTION .....	1
TWO.	A SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE.....	6
	A. The Studies.....	6
	B. The Findings.....	9
THREE.	METHODS: THE BIGSTORE STUDY.....	29
	A. Scope and Purposes.....	29
	B. Sources of Information.....	31
	C. Problems of Measurement.....	36
FOUR.	FINDINGS.....	47
	A. The Nature of the Offence.....	47
	B. Characteristics of Shoplifters.....	68
FIVE.	CONCLUSIONS.....	103
	A. A Summary of the Findings.....	103
	B. Deficiencies and Contributions.....	110
	***	
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	118



# LIST OF TABLES

<u>TABLE</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
1.	Number of Persons by Number of Items Taken	47
2.	Percentage of Males and Females who Stole More Than a Single Item of Given Value	50
3.	Percentages of Persons, either Juvenile or Adult, Stealing Under \$5 and Over \$50 Worth of Merchandise	53
4.	Juvenile or Adult Males/Females Stealing Under \$5 Worth of Merchandise	54
5.	Juvenile or Adult Males/Females Stealing \$5 - 9.99 Worth of Merchandise	55
6.	Juvenile or Adult Males/Females Stealing \$50 or more Worth of Merchandise	56
7.	Percentages of Males and Females Taking Types of Items	60
8.	Percent of Males/Females within a Type-of- Item Category	61
9.	Comparison of Male and Female Juveniles and Adults by Type of Item Stolen	62
10.	Style of Theft by Sex	66
11.	Age, Sex, and Racial Composition of the Bigstore Sample	68
12.	A Comparison of the Age Distribution of Bigstore Sample with 1976 Census Estimates	69





<u>TABLE</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
13.	Comparison of Sex and Age of Bigstore Shoplifters with 1977 Civic Census Estimates	73
14.	Disposition by Race	77
15.	Disposition by Race by Value of Stolen Goods	78
16.	Percent Prosecuted by Race - Controlling for Value of Stolen Goods and Sex	79
17.	Disposition by Race Controlling for Age	80
18.	Disposition by Race Controlling for Age, and Value of Stolen Goods	81
19.	Percent Prosecuted by Race of Offender, Controlling for Sex, Age, and Value of the Theft	82
20.	Comparison of Average Family Income Figures Between the Bigstore Sample Edmonton	89
21.	Occupation Classification of Bigstore's Shoplifters	92
22.	Occupation Classifications by Age	93
23.	Comparison of Value of Stolen Goods Taken by Transients with Value Taken by Population	97



## LISTS OF MAPS

<u>MAP</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
1. Number of Arrested Shoplifters by Census Tract	88



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the demographic and behavioral characteristics of a specific group of thieves - shoplifters. Shoplifters are people who steal goods from stores while pretending to be lawful patrons.

A subsequent chapter shows that there is often contradictory evidence about what *shoplifters* are like. One thing is certain about *shoplifting*, however: it costs retailers a great deal of money.

Unfortunately, a reliable accounting of shoplifting losses is impossible. Precise measurement of how much shoplifting takes place is confounded by the way losses are measured by retailers.

The merchant has two ways of uncovering losses: he can catch the shoplifter taking merchandise, or he can compare the number of items on his shelves with the number his ledgers record he *should* have. As merchants say, losses are discovered by comparing *on-floor* stock with *book* stock.

Inventory "shrinkage" refers to a situation in which more merchandise is shown on the books than is counted on the floor. A single figure is given by retailers to represent this "shrinkage": it is depicted as a percentage of gross sales volume.<sup>1</sup>



This shrinkage figure is composed of three major sources of loss: *error*, *employee theft*, and *shoplifting*. Error includes various forms of clerical carelessness that produce what Cobb calls "apparent shortages" (1978, p. 923).<sup>2</sup> The "real shortages", as Cobb calls them, are produced by employee theft and shoplifting. In both theft by staff and theft by customers, merchandise is physically removed from the store.

Sources do not agree as to how much each of these sources of loss contribute to the total shrinkage figure. Cobb cites persons who estimate that over 50 percent of losses are due to bookkeeping error. Gibbons (1968) asserts that most of the loss is due to employee theft. The loss-prevention manager of a large Edmonton department store makes an educated guess that error, employee theft, and shoplifting contribute 40 percent, 30 percent, and 30 percent respectively to the shrinkage figure.

We can understand, then, why so little consensus exists respecting the total losses due to shoplifting alone. The U.S. Small Business Administration estimates that total losses due to shoplifting were in the 5 to 15 *billion* dollars range during 1976 (Faria, 1977). Another source states that shoplifting losses in Canada and the United States amounted to about 3 million dollars during 1969 (Normandeau, 1971, p. 251). Yet another source estimates that 12 million dollars worth of





merchandise was stolen *every day* during 1976 (Cassell, 1977).

The size of these estimates would indicate that shoplifting is, in general, a common and costly type of theft. Also, shoplifting is hurting merchants in the city the data used in this study come from.

A downtown Edmonton department store started using an electronic anti-shoplifting device. A 200 percent increase in apprehended shoplifters occurred. The *Edmonton Sun* (1978) quotes the security manager of the store involved as saying

It's unbelievable how many people we are arresting; the shoplifting scene in this city must be crazy...So far we have recovered about \$7,000 worth of clothing.

Without the device, most of this would have disappeared.

The same article estimates shoplifting losses to be 15 million dollars annually in this Canadian city. A spokesman from another store agrees, adding that he believes losses to have been at this level for several years.

Although there is always the chance that a few shoplifters are stealing a *great deal* of merchandise, a more reasonable explanation for the size of these cost estimates is that many people shoplift. Shoplifting is a popular type of theft, making those caught doing it



worthy of examination.

### Objectives

This is a descriptive study of department store shoplifters. The data are from a large retail outlet we shall call "Bigstore".

This description of shoplifters reflects my concern for *who shoplifters are* and *what they do*. By undertaking such a description I hope to add to our knowledge about this type of thief in Canada. Most of what we know about shoplifters comes from older studies done in foreign countries. This study is designed to provide a careful description of the characteristics of shoplifters recently apprehended in a western Canadian department store.



## FOOTNOTES

1. For example, a store with receipts totalling \$5,000,000 for a fiscal year and an inventory shrinkage of \$100,000 will report losses of 2 percent. The loss prevention manager of Bigstore estimates the 2 percent shrink figure to be about par for large Canadian department stores.
2. However, in some cases error produces *real* shortage. An example would be a situation in which goods are delivered to the wrong address, and persons at that address do not inform the store that a mistake has been made.





## CHAPTER TWO

### A SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE

Since the central question of this study is, "Who is the shoplifter?", previous findings are reviewed as a background for comparison. Part "A" includes brief descriptions of research addressed to this question, and part "B" outlines the pertinent findings.

#### A. The Studies

The most ambitious study of shoplifting is Cameron's dissertation *Department Store Shoplifting* (1953).

This was a comprehensive account of the phenomenon as it existed in a single store in downtown Chicago. The sample consisted of a random selection of 1,153 shoplifting cases drawn from official arrest records compiled by security personnel. The records came from an eight year period (1943 through 1950). Court and police records were also used: 873 cases of shoplifting from the files of the Chicago Municipal court during the three year period 1948 to 1950 were utilized.

From this sample information was recorded and analyzed. The information included the shoplifter's (1953), pp.47-48:

1. sex
2. address
3. time of arrest



4. use of an alias
5. employment
6. marital status
7. spouses occupation
8. accomplices
9. previous record
10. age
11. nationality
12. merchandise recovered (number and type)
13. value of merchandise stolen
14. merchandise from other stores

Another general look at shoplifting was conducted by Robin (1963). The data consisted of records from three major department stores in Philadelphia for the year 1958. The sample included 1,581 persons arrested in these stores during that year.

A more specific look at shoplifting was presented by Won and Yamamoto's research (1963) on the relation between class position and shoplifting. This Honolulu study used the apprehension records of 493 shoplifters caught in the city's supermarket chains in 1962.

The lone Canadian study (Normandeau, 1971) followed Cameron and Robin in providing a general description of shoplifting and shoplifters. The study used more than one-thousand files compiled by security personnel in six Montreal department stores during 1969.



Cohen and Stark's study (1974) analyzed differential shoplifting dispositions. The study tested the findings of previous studies that indicated a disproportionate, and possibly biased, prosecution of minorities. To implement this test, Cohen and Stark selected a sample of 371 shoplifters apprehended in an urban California department store.

The same question of allegedly biased prosecution was reviewed by Hindelang a short while later (1974). The factors that affect a shoplifting victim's decision to prosecute were analyzed. Hindelang used data from drug and grocery stores, rather than from a department store, and analyzed data concerning 6,261 shoplifters apprehended in such stores during 1963, 1965 and 1968.

Kraut's study (1976) researched motivational factors underlying shoplifting behavior. The frame of reference used was societal reaction theory. Kraut used a self-report questionnaire (1,500 sent out; 606 responses received) to study the correlates of shoplifting allegedly influencing a shopper's decision to steal.

The most recent study available replicated the research of Cohen and Stark (1974) and Hindelang (1974). This research by Lundman (1978) used a sample of 664 shoplifters arrested in a midwestern branch of a U.S.-wide department store chain.





## B. The Findings

In keeping with my intent to describe the shoplifter, relevant findings will be discussed in terms of demographic variables. Other descriptive variables to be considered, however, are the patterns of shoplifting and the nature of the offence as stipulated by the literature.

### a) Age

Most authors divide this variable into two categories: juveniles and adults. Juveniles are usually defined as those persons younger than eighteen years while adults comprise the remaining age group.

#### 1. Juvenile/Adult ratio

The question of how much juveniles and adults differentially contribute to shoplifting is not clear.

Cameron reports that juveniles "are the most frequently arrested group both in numbers and in relation to the city population..." (1963, p. 115). However, the conclusion that juveniles are more frequently arrested is not supported by the data. A table giving age, sex, and racial breakdowns of Cameron's sample indicated that 297 persons were under 18 years of age, that is, about 26 percent of the sample (1953, p. 51).

It may be the case that in relation to their proportion in the population, juveniles comprise an overrepresented age category. The supporting evidence Cameron gives (1953, p. 85A) is confounded by the fact that the age





interval which is disproportionately represented contains *both* adults and juveniles (15 to 19 years) as she defines these categories. Given Cameron's original breakdown, one is led to the conclusion that young adults (19 years) are overrepresented in her sample.

Robin (1963) also asserts that shoplifting "appears to be essentially a juvenile activity" (p. 171). This conclusion is based upon his finding that 58.1 percent of his sample fall into this age category (p. 166; Table I). Since Robin does not compare this result against any *at-risk* population figures, we cannot tell if juveniles are over- or underrepresented in the sample. His conclusion may not be justified.

By contrast Won and Yamamoto (1968) find juveniles to be underrepresented in their sample. Although they are estimated to comprise 39.7 percent of the population in Honolulu, juveniles account for only 32 percent of the apprehensions (p. 47). The authors point out that this finding is likely due to the fact that the stores they sampled (supermarkets) are less attractive to youthful clientele (p. 53).

These same authors find adults to be disproportionately represented (p. 48):

The sheer empirical findings according to the age-level classification is (sic) that the three categories from twenty to forty-nine



years are proportionately over-represented as offenders. Among these, the twenty-twenty-nine age category appears significantly overrepresented as offenders.

In Normandeau's (1971) Montreal study, juveniles contribute a large component of total arrests:

Plus de 50 pour cent des clients-voleurs ont moins de 18 ans. En fait, plus d'un voleur sur 4 a moins 13 ans, 1 voleur sur 4 a entre 13 et 17 ans, 1 voleur sur 4 a entre 18 et 29 ans et 1 voleur sur 4 a plus de 30 ans (p. 255).

The mean age of Normandeau's sample of shoplifters is about 16 years of age (p. 255). In these results no effort is made to compare the age distribution of thieves with that in the general population or, what is more important, with that in the population at risk.

The study by Cohen and Stark (1974) indicates that juveniles and adults are about evenly represented. There are 202 juveniles in their sample, or about 55 percent of the total. Cohen and Stark limit their inquiry to the question of differential *prosecution*. Population figures, which give an indication of differential *apprehension*, are not reported.

Although we may intuitively expect more young persons to be committing theft of a petty nature such as much of



shoplifting is, there is no evidence in the literature that definitively lends support to such expectations. In short, previous research gives no clear picture of the age distribution of customer-thieves from retail stores.

## 2. Social Theft

It appears that the age of the shoplifter influences *how* he or she shoplifts. Juveniles more often steal in groups.

Cameron states that "the proportion of boys alone when arrested ranged from 0 for those 9 years of age or under to 100% of those 19 years of age" (1953, p. 117). A similar trend, though less pronounced, is apparent for girls: "Girls ranged from 0 alone at 10 years to 85% alone at 19 years" (p. 117).

Robin corroborates this finding:

The social character of shoplifting by juveniles is sharply underscored by the fact that 75.3 percent of them, compared with 23.3 percent of the adults, were apprehended in groups (1963, p. 170).

This suggests to Robin that the young shoplifter "more often works as part of a team, whereas the adult is a solitary operator" (p. 170). Robin would be more correct in saying that juveniles are more often part of a *group* when apprehended. No evidence is produced indicating that juveniles cooperate in thieving; there





is a difference between being with others and being on a team.

#### b. Sex

Common folk-lore has it that shoplifting is an activity primarily carried on by female offenders. This assumption is not consistently supported by the literature.

The store sample in Cameron's study is composed of 847 female shoplifters, or about 75 percent of the total sample of 1,153 (1953, p. 51).

Robin's data indicate that 60.7 percent of his sample are female (1963, p. 166).

Similarly, Won and Yamamoto find that 59.4 percent of their sample is female (1968, p. 46). They posit that since the population figures for Honolulu indicate females make up 49 percent of the population, they are over-represented in the sample of thieves (p. 46). Males, on the other hand, are said to be underrepresented, since they comprise 40.6 percent of the apprehended sample and 48.8 percent of the population (p. 46).

Normandeau finds that males and females are evenly represented in his sample (1971, p. 254). He also finds that age makes a difference in the sex ratio of shoplifters:

Toute fois, parmi les clients juveniles,  
il y a 6 hommes pour 4 femmes, alors que chez  
les clients adultes, il y a 6 femmes pour 4  
hommes (p. 254).





Cohen and Stark's findings (1974) are congruent with Normandeau's. They reported a nearly one-to-one ratio between males and females in their sample of arrested thieves. Of 371 apprehended persons, 48.25 percent are female (p. 179).

The literature does not agree as to the proportion of males and females that shoplift. In addition, none of the studies compare the sex ratio of apprehended shoplifters with the sex ratio of the at-risk population. Even Won and Yamamoto's analysis (1968) is deficient for this reason. They only compare their sample of arrested persons against *general* population figures. Since men and women do not frequent retail stores proportionately - and in particular since they do not spend the same amount of time in stores - comparison of sex ratios thus far has not been risk-based.

This deficiency applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to almost all of the literature on shoplifting.

#### c. Race

The bulk of research on shoplifting uses American data. Because of this, the question of race difference in theft is usually dealt with in terms of black and white. The most contentious issue seems to be whether store detectives treat blacks differentially. That is, do detectives behave in a discriminatory manner?



Cohen and Stark's study of shoplifting (1974) deals with this issue. The authors state that both Cameron and Robin report "a systematic racial bias in the treatment of shoplifters: that blacks are disproportionately apprehended (which, it is suggested, stems from differential surveillance) and that they are also disproportionately turned over to the police, rather than let go once they are apprehended" (p. 29).

However, Cohen and Stark's statement that Cameron's results suggest the disproportionate apprehension of blacks is incorrect. She reports:

In the six year period 1945 to 1950, 88/867 or 10.2 percent of all arrests were Negro. During this same period about 14 percent of the population of the city was negro. Negro people thus contributed less than their proportion in the city population to the total arrests by the Store in this period of time (1953, p. 108).

But, Cameron does find, as Cohen and Stark suggest, that blacks are disproportionately *charged* with shoplifting offences. She comments:

Whereas the Store formally charged 10.9 percent of all arrested non-negroes with larceny, 58 percent of all negroes who were arrested were so charged. Of the white women arrested



8.85% were charged with larceny, and of negro women 42 percent were charged (1953, p. 141).

Robin's study (1963) states that blacks are both arrested and prosecuted in disproportionate numbers (p. 163). He reports that 48.2 percent of his sample are black. However, as Cohen and Stark note, Robin "does not reveal his basis (for concluding blacks are differentially arrested) and we can only assume that it was simply the large number of blacks in his sample" (1974, p. 32).

Regarding dispositions, Robin reports that in thefts of twenty-five dollars or more, a statistically significant difference exists between the prosecution of blacks and whites. He states that "62.1 percent of the white shoplifters, compared with 79.2 percent of the negro shoplifters, were prosecuted" (p. 179).

Cohen and Stark arrive at findings similar to Robin's regarding apprehensions and race:

Clearly blacks are very disproportionately represented in the shoplifter population - 51 percent of apprehensions versus 22 percent of the shopper population:<sup>1</sup> more than a two-to-one overrepresentation. Mexican-Americans are also overrepresented (31 percent to 25 percent). On the other hand, whites are grossly underrepresented. They constitute





only 13 percent of the apprehended shoplifters, while making up 46 percent of the shopping population (p. 32).

Cohen and Stark offer a partial explanation for the foregoing results by looking at the relationship between the race of the store detective and the racial composition of those he or she arrested. They find that "store detectives who were minority group members disproportionately apprehended shoplifters of their own race" (1974, p. 33). The authors conclude that this was the result of differential behavior on the part of shoplifters: "Minority persons simply were more careless in front of detectives from the same minority" (p. 34).

Cohen and Stark also find an apparent racial bias in the disposition of apprehended shoplifters. They report that "while 46 percent of adult whites and Mexican-Americans were released, only 34 percent of black adults were released" (p. 34).

When Cohen and Stark controlled for the *value* of the merchandise stolen, "there remained no racial differences (in percent prosecuted) among adults who took goods over the value of \$30-only approximately 15 percent in each group were released" (p. 35). There remained a large difference in percentage prosecuted between blacks and whites among those stealing less than \$30, however.





This latter difference was also spurious. First, the authors introduced controls for the sex of the offender. A 10 percentage-point difference remaining between blacks and whites who took less than \$30 in merchandise was wiped out when this control was used.

That is, the difference in percent prosecuted was attributable to the fact that "black adults were very disproportionately male: 58 percent were male while only 37 percent of whites were males" (p. 35).

Second, *this* finding was found to be spurious: "It was unemployment correlated with sex, not sex itself that produced the wipe out" (p. 35). In other words, the differences in prosecution rates were ultimately attributable to the differential prosecution of unemployed males. The authors concluded that similar controls<sup>2</sup> would have led Cameron and Robin to similar findings (p. 35).

A congruent conclusion is drawn by Hindelang (1974). This author's findings suggest that the "retail value of the items stolen is more closely and consistently related to referral rate than race, sex, or age" (p. 584). Overall, Hindelang reports that the "decisions of victims to refer shoplifters to the police were found to be more closely related to the value of the goods stolen, as well as to what was stolen and how it was stolen, than to the characteristics of the offender" (p. 580).



Lundman (1978) reexamines the relationship between race and police referral. His findings also point to the importance of the value of merchandise. He states that the present study provides support for Hindelang's conclusion that the retail value of the item stolen is the most important factor in the referral decision (1978, p. 399).

However, Lundman finds race to play a larger part in influencing this decision than Hindelang does. He states that Cameron's findings and his own suggest that "store security personnel continue to discriminate against minority shoplifters" (1978, p. 400).

The value of the theft will require special scrutiny with respect to the race/disposition relationship. Otherwise, it is not certain how closely the Canadian situation applies to the American one.

Even with Canadian data, as Normandeau's (1971) study demonstrates, the results on race may be area-specific. The ethnic variables Normandeau used were based primarily upon the language differential; French-Canadian, English-Canadian, and other nationality (p. 255).

In comparison with population figures, the French-Canadian group are significantly overrepresented among those apprehended - 92 percent of Normandeau's apprehended sample are French-Canadian, but this group comprises only 65 percent of the population (p. 255). Conversely, the



other two racial groups are underrepresented: English-Canadians comprise only 2 percent of the shoplifting sample but 19 percent of the population, and "other nationality" makes up 6 percent of the sample versus 16 percent of the population (p. 255).

Again, it is not certain how these breakdowns are relevant for the present study.

One study that may have lessons for the Canadian context of my research is that by Won and Yamamoto (1968). They report that:

The Caucasians, presently the largest ethnic group in the State of Hawaii, represent themselves proportionately among the shoplifters. The Japanese, second in size to the Caucasians, significantly *under*represent themselves with less than one-half its (sic) proportionate share among the shoplifters...By far the worst offenders appear to be the Hawaiians with the number of offenders exceeding its (sic) population size in the community by more than two-thirds (p. 51, emphasis in the original).

In other words, the "native" racial group<sup>3</sup> is found to be considerably overrepresented. Although drawing close parallels to the Canadian situation does not appear warranted, this finding may be noted in comparison with the "native" contingent of the present study's sample.





#### d. Socio-Economic Status

The literature which comments upon the social location of shoplifters indicates a trend for them to be of the working classes, neither poor nor affluent. Official records usually do not contain information on the more precise indicators of social status such as education or income. For the most part, socio-economic status is inferred from the shoplifters place of residence and what they do for a living.

Cameron finds that shoplifters are neither middle-class nor poor. "most shoplifters would probably be respectable working people" (1953, p. 107), she states.

Cameron bases this conclusion on results that indicate "a significantly higher proportion of manual workers among the employed shoplifters, both female and male, arrested in XYZ and Co. than in the Chicago population" (1953, p. 106). In keeping with this finding, Cameron's results show that shoplifters represent a lower socio-economic stratum than XYZ and Co. shoppers<sup>4</sup> (1955, p. 111).

Past criminal history constitutes the measure of "respectability". Cameron reports that in her store data 18 (12 percent) of the men and 20 (3 percent) of the women have prior criminal records (1953, p. 99). She goes on to note that for women "a maximum of approximately 2% of non-commercial women shoplifters...were arrested more than once" (1953, p. 101). A maximum of 6 percent is found for male non-commercial shoplifters (p. 101). This leads to





the conclusion that "the bulk of pilferers appear to have no prior experience with arrest and prosecution for crimes; they are not career criminals" (p. 101).

Cohen and Stark's (1974) findings indicate that class (measured by occupational prestige) does not affect the disposition of shoplifters *"so long as they have some legitimate status vis-a-vis the labour force"* (p. 36, emphasis in original). If one is unemployed, one's chances of police referral are considerably greater.

Controlling for the value of merchandise stolen did not reduce this difference; the effect of value and unemployment were found to be additive and independent (p. 36). That is,

If a person were both unemployed and caught with goods worth more than \$30, his chances for release were *zero*. Not a single one of 32 persons meeting both of these criteria were released! On the other hand, if one were both employed and caught with merchandise worth less than \$30, he had two chances in three of being released (1974, pp. 36-37; emphasis in original).

Won and Yamamoto's study (1968) directly addresses the question of the shoplifter's social status. Their indicators are household income level, educational level, and occupational ranking.



The first two of these indicators were estimated through the shoplifter's home address. Median income and education levels were estimated for each shoplifter's neighborhood of residence.

It should be noted again that this research deals with shoplifting in a specific type of retail outlet - the supermarket. The generalizability of these findings may be limited as a result.

Their findings are interesting, however. Won and Yamamoto report that the poor (those earning under \$5,000) are *underrepresented* as offenders (1968, p. 49). The middle-income categories are significantly *overrepresented*. The authors point out that:

Approximately 78 percent of the offenders are in the 5,000 to 8,999 income categories and only about 37 percent of the larger population of Honolulu belong in this income category (p. 49).

Although their sample is taken from "major supermarkets" (p. 45) we cannot ascertain if these income strata are equally represented in these stores. That is, the major supermarkets may be differentially shopped by people in the middle-income bracket.

The education indicator the authors used gives similar results. About 73 percent of the offenders come from neighborhoods representing an education level of senior high school attainment (p. 49).



The results on occupation appear to corroborate Cameron's findings. Won and Yamamoto state that "the statistics indicate that almost two-thirds of the offenders were from the manual working class" (p. 51).

While the majority of evidence supports Cameron's picture of the shoplifter as a "respectable" working person, failure of these studies to adequately define their comparative base-rates compromises their worth for the present research.

#### e. Patterns of Shoplifting

Cameron's categorization of shoplifters into two types, either commercial or pilferer, is the most notable pattern found in the literature. The "booster" (commercial)/"snitch" (pilferer) dichotomy is based upon three criteria: 1) the way the goods are disposed of by the thieves, 2) the relationship the thief has with respect to the criminal subculture, and 3) the way the thief thinks of himself or herself.

The booster is distinguished from the snitch<sup>5</sup> in the way each handles the goods he or she steals. According to Cameron, boosters "steal merchandise to sell it", while the snitches "steal merchandise for their own consumption" (1964, p. 39).

Second, Cameron states that boosters are intimately involved in the criminal subculture while snitches are not (1964, p. 59). The snitch has "no criminal associations





or connections...", she reports (1964, p. 59).

Boosters and snitches also differ in that the former think of themselves as criminal while the latter do not (1964, p. 58). As Cameron puts it, "pilferers differ in one outstanding respect, at least, from other thieves; they generally do not think of themselves as thieves" (1964, p. 159; emphasis omitted).

These criteria for distinguishing the professional and amateur shoplifter are problematic. A difficulty they hold in common is that each involves a large degree of guesswork when operationalized.

It is difficult to estimate how stolen goods are going to be used. We cannot be sure what the offender is going to do with the merchandise he or she filches. It seems reasonable to propose that a "snitch", given the appropriate opportunity, sells stolen merchandise for personal gain. Conversely, it is also a reasonable proposition that not all the merchandise a booster successfully steals, clothing in particular, is sold for profit.

Another problem is accurately gauging how a person "thinks of himself". Here one is involved in the questionable process of inferring mental states from verbal behavior.

Finally, there is the objection to using contact with a criminal subculture as a criterion for categorizing criminals. First, there is the problem of deciding *how much* of such contact justifies placement of the offender





in one category or another. Second, we know that many people lie. Since demonstrating knowledge of criminal ways is not in the thief's best interest when arrested, it is reasonable to conclude that an offender will be inclined to lie when questioned about such knowledge.

Be that as it may, the important conclusion Cameron reaches about these patterns of shoplifting is that an overwhelming majority (90 percent) of shoplifters are represented by the "snitch" category (1964, p. 68). Results presented both above and below tend to support the conclusion that most shoplifters "dabble" in this form of theft.

#### f. The Nature of the Offence

The data indicate that a shoplifting episode for an average shoplifter is not a very remunerative experience. Cameron's results indicate that the median value of stolen merchandise for her store sample arrested shoplifters is six dollars (1953, p. 62), or about \$20 in today's valuation.

Similarly, both Robin's (1963, p. 168) and Cohen and Stark's (1974, p. 31) results show that about 79 percent of their samples have stolen goods worth less than thirty dollars.

Cameron indicates that these low-value thefts are composed, for the most part, of small, easily concealed items (1953, p. 70).



Most research supports Cameron's thesis that the majority of shoplifters are petty pilferers.

### Conclusions

The description of shoplifters given by the literature is often contradictory. However, the research does agree on several points: shoplifters are amateurs, they come disproportionately from the "working class", and young shoplifters are more often caught in groups.

Several studies reviewed above suffer from methodological shortcomings. Difficulties associated with the use of store apprehension records and the problems in establishing risk-based populations for comparison are often not addressed. The following chapter discusses these and other problems associated with the present study.



## FOOTNOTES

1. In this case the shopper population was discerned by placing spotters at all store doors during 10 hours randomly selected from the 50 store business hours during a one-week period. Spotters counted race, sex, and apparent age (adult/juvenile) of all persons entering the store (1974, p. 32).
2. During the introduction of these controls, Cohen and Stark make no mention of the cell sizes used as a basis for analysis. When the writer introduced essentially the same controls to a sample 240 cases *larger* than theirs, cell-sizes became too small for analysis in several instances.
3. Nettler notes the popularity and *vagueness* of the word "native". He points out that the term means "to be born of" by which criterion Indians and Eskimos are no more "native" than any first-generation group born in their land of residence (1978, p. 144n).
4. Cameron uses the ecological distribution of addresses of persons who claimed merchandise from the "Lost and Found" department as an XYZ shopper.
5. Comparable Canadian terminology appears to be "professional" and "amateur" - the term "booster" is used as a general descriptor for any shoplifter, and "snitch" is not used at all in the sense in which Cameron uses it.





## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS: THE BIGSTORE STUDY

This section provides an account of the study upon which subsequent findings are based. This account includes the scope and purposes of the study, the sources of information used in it, and the methodological problems that accompany this inquiry into the characteristics of shoplifters. It becomes clear that doing social research is not as exact a science as one might wish.

#### A. Scope and Purposes of the Bigstore Study

The present study is designed to answer questions about characteristics of the people caught stealing merchandise in Bigstore. The purpose of this study is to describe who the shoplifter is. Part of this description also includes how the shoplifter *behaves*.

The emphasis is upon the demographic characteristics of the Bigstore sample. Specifically, the variables "age", "sex," and "race" are of central importance. In addition to a demographic description, a behavioral description is also included. This latter description attempts to answer the questions: 1) How do they do it?, and 2) What do they take?

There are several justifications of my study. The foremost reason is the need for a careful description of shoplifters in a Canadian setting. There exists, to my knowledge, but one empirical study of department store



shoplifting in Canada (Normandeau, 1971). As a result, much of what we know about shoplifting comes from foreign sources.

A second justification is the age of the data on shoplifting that is currently available. The single most important study of shoplifting is Cameron's *The Booster and the Snitch* published in 1964. This book is adapted from Cameron's 1953 doctoral dissertation and uses American (Chicago) data from the period 1943 through 1950. Although more recent studies of shoplifting exist, most of these address the issue of differential police referral. A general descriptive study of shoplifters has not been done since Normandeau's (1971). The need for updated descriptive research is clear.

Still another characteristic of the literature contributed to the decision to do the Bigstore study: the scarcity of research. Kraut (1976, p. 358) agrees that the "sociological research is scanty...". This author cites three sources as comprising the bulk of work done on department store shoplifting (Cameron, 1964; Robin, 1963; Cohen and Stark, 1974). Of these three, as shown in the survey of the literature, at least one (Robin's) suffers from serious methodological difficulties.

The major value of the Bigstore study is its provision of a careful description of the social and behavioral characteristics of the retail shoplifter, done for the



first time in an English-Canadian setting.

## B. Sources of Information

The following section outlines the sources of information used in the Bigstore study. These sources are: the store data, the census data, the door count measure, and data gathered through a participant-observation technique. Characteristics of, and problems with, these sources are discussed.

### a. Store Data

The store sample consists of *all* apprehension records dealing with shoplifting that were compiled during the years 1975 through 1977. A total of 611 cases comprise the store "sample" or, perhaps more accurately, *population* of thieves. The number of apprehensions per year decreased during the three year period, with 241 shoplifters caught in 1975, 189 caught in 1976, and 181 caught in 1977.

The store sample has its origin in the apprehension records produced by Bigstore's security people as a routine part of the arrest procedure. The quality of these records varied, and not all were as complete as the researcher would have liked. The legally-pertinent information was nearly always complete, and included the exact value of merchandise stolen, and personal variables such as sex and legal status (i.e., juvenile or adult).

The information of interest to this study, like employment, home address, and other sociological variables





was sometimes incomplete or missing.

Not only is the legally-relevant information more complete, but it is also likely to be more accurate than information not needed for the prosecution of offenders. The details required for the prosecution of those caught are the most energetically verified, as Cameron points out (1953, pp. 52-53).

The information on age (beyond or below the legal status boundaries), address, and employment is, in Cameron's words "subject to whatever inaccuracy the shoplifter, for one reason or another, introduced" (1953, p. 49). There are many reasons why a person apprehended for shoplifting would want to hide or distort information about himself or herself. They are, after all, in trouble.

Being arrested often involves a painful situation at home or at work if persons at these places should learn of the shoplifter's involvement in a crime. In some cases it might mean the loss of a place to live or means of making a living. Cameron notes "Store detectives report that arrested men frequently exhibit great anxiety lest their employers be informed of their arrest" (1953, p. 104).

There is, as a result, reason to suspect the reliability of a variable like employment. Information on the address of the shoplifter is probably also distorted sometimes for these same reasons.





This personal information is easily lied about, and difficult to verify. I feel safe in concluding that some unknown proportion of the data on these variables is most certainly fallacious.

Be that as it may, the Bigstore apprehension records contain a variety of information on the persons apprehended for stealing merchandise. The most important information for the present study includes the shoplifter's

1. Sex
2. Age - Either "juvenile" (under 18 years) or "adult" (18 years or over).
3. Race - The major categories are "white", "native" (meaning Indian, Eskimo, or Metis), and "other non-whites".
4. Employment - Including the category "unemployed".
5. Address - Either the subject's actual city address or the category, "no fixed address". Also, several ecological variables are used, based upon the actual city address of the shoplifter. They include categorization by enumeration areas, census tracts, and by enumeration districts.
6. Temporal Information - The year, month, date, day, and time the offence took place.



7. Stolen Merchandise Variables - The number, total value, and kind of merchandise stolen in Bigstore. An attempt to secure the same information about items stolen from other stores was not successful due to the lack of consistent information on these items in the Bigstore records.<sup>1</sup>
8. "Social Theft" Information - A description of persons accompanying the shoplifter, if there were such.
9. Style of Theft - These styles refer principally to the hiding places that the thieves use in the concealment of merchandise.
10. Disposition and Outcome - This information records whether or not the store detectives decide to prosecute the offender. If they do prosecute, the sentences the shoplifter receives is also recorded when available. No sentences are made public for convicted juveniles in Alberta.

b. Census Data

There are three sources of general population data used in this study: the 1971 Federal Census, 1976 Federal Census, and Edmonton's 1977 Civic Census. These three



sources are used because one does not contain the necessary information for all comparisons with the Bigstore data that are required by the analysis. The most comprehensive data are from the 1971 Federal Census. However, due to the age of the information in this census, it is only used as a last resort. Nevertheless, as Silverman notes (1977, p. 8), "the population characteristics probably have not changed drastically in a five year period". This would apply to the period the Bigstore study's data come from. My inquiries lend support to Silverman's contention.

A comparison of age and sex distributions for the 1971 and 1976 Censuses reveal few differences. The *largest* difference between a given age and sex category for the two tabulations is in the range of 2 percent.

Since the population characteristics of Edmonton have remained stable from 1971 to 1976, it is likely that all three of the census sources are directly comparable. An effort is made, however, to use the most recent census estimates available.

#### c. Door Count Measures

The population estimates given by census data apply to the Edmonton population; they may not apply to the *Bigstore* population, however. It is necessary to obtain some estimates of the characteristics of the people *at risk* of shoplifting - the people in the store.<sup>2</sup>





Cohen and Stark use a technique in which the characteristics of persons entering the store are counted (1974, p. 32). A similar technique is used in the Bigstore study.

The count is used to obtain estimates of the percentages of males and females, whites and non-whites, shopping in Bigstore. Sex and race variables were tabulated because these attributes are ostensive characteristics easiest to judge with some accuracy.

A total of ten observation hours for each variable are used. These hours are randomly selected (using a table of random numbers) from the total operating hours of Bigstore.

#### d. Participant Observation

During a two-week period, I observed closely activities of the store detectives. During this period I also worked a number of hours on the shopping floor in surveillance with the detectives.

The data gathered through this participant observation activity is of benefit in identifying the possible sources of bias in Bigstore's apprehension records. Participant observation has also provided information on how the store detectives operate in catching shoplifters.

#### C. Problems of Measurement

During the course of completing this study, I was confronted by the many possible sources of error intruding into a tally of shoplifters. This research confirms the



problems of reliability and validity in counting crimes (Nettler, 1978; Silverman and Teevan, 1975).

The purpose of this section is to acknowledge and delineate some of the possible sources of error that may influence the Bigstore data analysis.

The first source is the bias introduced in the records by the operating methods of Bigstore's detectives. A second source has its origin in the use of data from semi-official records. Third, and last, the problem of limitations to the research is discussed.

#### a. Sources of Bias in Bigstore Records

The apprehension records are kept by the personnel of the store's security section. When an arrest is made, the offender is interrogated and the information recorded on an apprehension form.

Cameron lists three biasing factors that possibly influence the information she used (1953, p. 17). They are

1. The stationing and operating methods of detectives employed by stores.
2. The fact that some stores employ detectives and others do not.
3. Minority group prejudices and economic class prejudices on the part of a store detective.

The participant observation data confirm that the methods used by store detectives make for selective



surveillance. In the first place, Bigstore's total area is approximately 91,000 square meters on four selling floors. At times there are four or five detectives patrolling this large area. Most of the time there are less.

Store detectives agree that some areas receive more attention than others. For example, three areas which receive more surveillance are jewellery, cosmetics, and the bargain floor.

A possible biasing factor that could be introduced by this selective attention is that these departments are primarily of appeal to female shoppers (or shoplifters). As shown below, however, the operation of a biasing factor against women is not borne out in the findings.

A second possible biasing factor is that not all stores employ detectives. Intuitively, one might assume that full-time professional detectives would be more adept at catching thieves than staff whose major duties are sales or management. This assumption appears warranted in large stores. As Robin notes, "the regular sales personnel play no significant part in apprehending shoplifters..." (1963, p. 171).

However, there are no tallies indicating that stores without detectives arrest shoplifters at a *lower rate* than stores with them. The facts appear to be that stores without detectives are usually smaller in area - hence surveillance of the store is facilitated. In addition, proprietors





and staff in smaller retail outlets are more likely to be doing shoplifting surveillance as part of their work routines.

Another biasing factor is introduced in the daily operations of the store detectives: they tend to watch certain minority groups and people who appear to be poor more closely. There is an indication in the results of the study that this factor may influence who is apprehended.

Although Cameron calls this biasing factor "prejudice" (1953, p. 17), it is a moot point whether this phenomenon reflects the distorted perceptions of detectives or the reality of who is doing the stealing.

The biasing factors discussed above may influence the store data to some degree. It is submitted that these factors operate for all such large department stores and, as such, influence all available empirical data.

#### b. Problems Associated with the Use of Semi-Official Records as Data-Source.

Much of criminological inquiry is based upon data from official records. These records are usually compiled by groups or organizations and institutions having contact with some aspect of criminal justice. Criminological research, be it in Bigstore or in our courts, is grounded in data recorded by someone else. There are problems associated with the use of these records as a data source which may affect the reliability and validity of our





research.

In the Bigstore study, the bulk of the data used is the results of the compilations of store detectives. Data is obtained from the respondent, a shoplifter, and placed upon standard-format apprehension records by these security personnel.

As Gertz and Talarico (1977) note, the act of recording this information contributes error that adversely influences the reliability of a study. These authors call this source of error "clerical carelessness". In their study of courts, they point out that "in a portion of the state's attorney's files, it was discovered that a number of defendants had been convicted before they had been arrested" (p. 219).

As long as this clerical error is random, the errors tend to cancel one another. However, as Gertz and Talarico show, even the most basic of information can be fraught with error.

This form of error is undoubtedly present in the Bigstore records. Some obvious errors showed up when coding these records but, unless the error was such that one could detect a logical inconsistency (for example, a subject named John Doe listed as female), it persists in my records.

Another more troublesome source of error has to do with the measurement of many of the variables used in the Bigstore study. The measurement of a variable in social



science often requires that it be categorized. Some variables lend themselves to categorization while others do not.

For instance, "sex" is a variable in which the categories are self-evident. For this reason, this variable is probably a reliable one. This is not the case for a variable like "occupation," however. Information on occupation is ambiguously reported, aside from factors that make outright lying about it a possibility. Eisenstein and Jacob note in their work on urban U.S. criminal courts:

Police reports often indicate occupation and employment status, but both are often stated in such ambiguous terms that we could not interpret them without further information that was generally not available. For instance, engineer may mean janitor or civil engineer; salesman may mean clerking at a dime store or selling computers for IBM (1977, p. 181).

Ambiguous reporting of occupation is also characteristic of the Bigstore apprehension records. At times *no* occupation is listed, but only the *place* where a shoplifter works. Knowing only that the subject works at "Acme Construction" is of no help in determining his or her occupation.

These sources of error combine to make the picture we get of the shoplifter less than a clear one.



### c. Limitations of the Research

There are two major limitations to the present study. The first has to do with the large proportion of Bigstore's shoplifters unaccounted for in the Bigstore apprehension records.

The use of apprehension records means that only the characteristics of shoplifters who are caught are entered into the analysis. As Kraut points out with reference to the use of official arrest reports for data:

Inferences from these data about the type of person who shoplifts and the effects of apprehension are questionable especially since official statistics, based only on arrested shoplifters, by definition prevent a comparison of shoplifters who have been caught with those who haven't (1976, p. 358).

Cameron's informants estimate that 20 to 35 percent of all shoplifters are incorporated into official or semi-official statistics (1953, p. 10). Cameron is aware of the problem Kraut alludes to:

Shoplifters who are not caught, or course, and those who are caught but not arrested form an unknown and actually unknowable segment of the criminal population (1953, p. 10).

This problem becomes a serious one when there are indications, as in the Bigstore study, that those who are







not caught represent certain *types* of individuals. In the Bigstore study under the variable "style of theft," a category labelled "professional" was intended for those persons who made use of more sophisticated stealing techniques, including use of the various instruments the professionals employ (booster boxes, booster coats, etc.).

However, as it turned out, not a single case of the 611 reviewed fell into this "professional" category. In my opinion there is reason to believe that these adept thieves are rarely being caught. This opinion is supported by the anecdotal testimony of many of the detectives; most have at least one story of the fruitless surveillance of an obviously professional shoplifter. In order to apprehend such "pro's", the store security staff must be as good as they are, and this is often not the case.

It is acknowledged that more shoplifting takes place than is represented in apprehension records. The store detectives do not catch all shoplifters, by any means. This is true of almost any form of criminality. A major lesson of introductory criminology courses is that more crime takes place than is recorded.

Also, for almost every type of crime, those persons who are "good" at it (by definition) do not get caught as often. Mack (1972) studied these "able criminals". His findings support my contention that adept thieves are not apprehended as often as their less-adept colleagues. He



reports that "a sizeable proportion of persistent criminals, including a fair number of direct predators - thieves, robbers, and housebreakers... - are remarkably skilful in avoiding arrest and conviction..." (1972, p. 48).

Kraut proposes to avoid this limitation by using self-report questionnaires. The idea is to get people to tell us about the crimes they get away with. But, as Nettler states:

Instruments built out of people's answers to our questions are always tricky. There are good reasons for listening skeptically to what people tell us they have done (1978, p. 113).

A second limitation of this study is the result of its dependence upon a single store for the data. The use of a single store as a data source may mean the study has limited generalizability: the results may not represent shoplifters in general.

Bigstore is a large retail outlet in Edmonton, Alberta, comparable to the "XYZ and Co." store used by Cameron. Cameron describes XYZ as follows:

The store is one of the largest in the city. It attempts to appeal to all social classes of customers by carrying a wide price range of merchandise in departments from the crowded "Budget Floor" (storese for bargain basement) to the exclusive "Paris Shop"... Cheap though



some of its price lines may be, XYZ and Co., has, along with one or two other department stores in the city, a reputation for "better goods" and higher prices than most other stores (1953, p. 23).

This is also a good description of "Bigstore,". In keeping with its variety of prices and merchandise and its central location this store appeals to a wide range of clientele.

Shoplifters caught in this store may not be representative of all shoplifters and a continuing, but unanswered, question is how accurate a study must be before it is accounted representative of anything. There is some reason to believe that Bigstore's shoplifters are representative of those frequenting all large downtown department stores in Edmonton.<sup>3</sup> For example, 76 percent of the stolen merchandise from other stores in the possession of shoplifters apprehended in Bigstore came from such large department stores. However, this evidence does not provide adequate grounds for making a decision on what the Bigstore sample is representative of.

The mandate of this study is to describe the characteristics of shoplifters apprehended in Bigstore. Questions as to how representative these characteristics are of shoplifters in general cannot be answered by a study of this scope.





## FOOTNOTES

1. This is partially a legal problem: detectives are reticent to charge persons with theft of other stores' property because of the difficulty in proving the goods are stolen.
2. Store detectives may be considered to be "sampling" from a population when they arrest a shoplifter. We must discern the characteristics of this population so that we may ascertain if categories of persons are either over or underrepresented.
3. A question unanswered by this study is whether certain of these stores have reputations for better, more thorough surveillance. This is an important question because the avoidance of our store by knowledgeable shoplifters would influence our results.





## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

#### A. The Nature of the Offence

The purpose of this study is to describe the shoplifter. This includes a description of what a shoplifter does: that is, how he or she *behaves*. Consequently, this section examines the nature of the thefts that take place in Bigstore.

The tallies include how many items are stolen, what their value is, what kind of items they are, and how they are taken.

##### a) Number of Items Stolen

As Table 1 shows, a large majority of shoplifters take 5 items or less. About 85 percent (518/611) of all shoplifters apprehended in Bigstore had 5 or less items on them.

TABLE 1

Number of Persons by the Number of Items Taken

No. OF ITEMS	No. OF PERSONS	PERCENT
Single Items	253	41.4
2 to 5	265	43.4
6 to 10	60	9.8
11 to 15	21	3.4
16 to 20	5	.8
21 to 25	4	.7
Over 25	2	.3
Missing Case	1	.2
Total	611	100%



The most interesting finding concerning the number of items taken is the apparent relationship between a shop-lifter's sex and this variable. My findings corroborate Cameron's (1953, pp. 74-76) in showing that men and women differ in the number of items they take.

In Cameron's sample, 46 percent of the adult men and 60 percent of the adult women had *more than* one item of stolen merchandise, a ratio of 1 man to 1.3 women. In the present sample the ratio is almost exactly the same - 1 man to 1.2 women. About 52 percent of the adult men (113/216) and 67 percent of adult women (95/142) were caught in Bigstore with more than one item. There appears to be a strong tendency for adult women to steal more items.<sup>1</sup>

This difference is also found among juvenile males and females. Of all juvenile males, 52 percent (78/149) took more than one item. Of all juvenile females, on the other hand, 69 percent (71/102) took multiple items. The percentage of juvenile males taking more than one item remained the same as the percentage of adult males doing so. Female juveniles were slightly more likely (69% *vs.* 67%) than adult women to have more than a single item of merchandise in their possession when apprehended.

Obviously, controlling for the offender's age does not remove the sex relationship in the number of items stolen.

The sex difference does not disappear when controls are added for the race of the offender. These controls



are added in order to ascertain whether it is the sex difference correlated with race that is accounting for the results.

It appears that sex differences exist across all three racial categories: white, native, and other non-whites. For the whites, 53.8 percent of the males (149/277) took more than one item but 64.5 percent of the females did so (120/186). Among Indians and Metis there is even a greater difference: 47.8 percent of the males (31/65) in contrast to 73.8 percent (31/42) of the females. The greatest sex difference is to be found among the "other non-whites". Although this is a small category (N = 36), the results show that 50 percent of the men (11/22) and 100 percent of the women (14/14) had more than one item on them when arrested.

Clearly, there is some relationship between the race of the offender and sex difference in the number of items stolen. Male and female non-whites tend to have even greater differences between them than the two sexes of white offenders do. However, since no race exhibited no sex difference, we can say that the tendency of females to take more items is independent of their race.

In order to further delineate the relationship between an offender's sex and the number of items he or she steals, controls are added for the total *value* of the items taken. In *all but two* of the value categories, the percentage of







males stealing more than one item is less than the percentage of all females doing so.

TABLE 2

The Percentage of all Males and of all Females who  
Stole More than a Single Item of a Given Value.

	MALE	FEMALE
Under \$5	54.1% (72/133)	45.1% (32/71)
\$ 5 - 9.99	43.1% (25/ 58)	58.3% (21/36)
\$10 - 14.99	50 % (16/ 32)	81.8% (18/22)
\$15 - 19.99	47.8% (11/ 23)	79.3% (23/29)
\$20 - 24.99	53.3% ( 8/ 15)	66.7% (12/18)
\$25 - 29.99	62.5% (10/ 16)	75% ( 9/12)
\$30 - 34.99	42.9% ( 3/ 7)	100% ( 8/ 8)
\$35 - 39.99	66.7% (10/ 15)	100% ( 6/ 6)
\$40 - 44.99	85.7% ( 6/ 7)	50% ( 2/ 4)
\$45 - 49.99	33.3% ( 2/ 6)	100% ( 2/ 2)
\$50+	51.9% (27/ 52)	89.2% (33/37)

Table 2 shows that in the lowest-value category ("under \$5") proportionately more males took more than a single item than females did. This means that in the least monetarily-serious category males took more items.

As the value of the items goes up, however, males tend to take fewer ones. This indicates that these items



are worth more on a cost-per-unit basis. For example, in the highest-value category containing all those thefts of merchandise the total worth of which came to \$50 or more, 51.9 percent of all males in the category stole more than a single item. But 89.2% of the women in this category stole more than one piece of merchandise. In other words, *1 of every 2* males who stole a total of \$50 or more in merchandise did it by stealing *one item* only. By contrast, only about *1 in every 10* females did the same.

### Conclusions

It appears that the two sexes differ to a considerable degree in the number and value of good they steal. Men are more likely to be apprehended with a single item (68.8 percent of those stealing a single item were male), while females prefer to steal more merchandise. Although men steal fewer items, the items they take are more costly on a per-unit basis.

When controls are introduced for the age and race of the offender, this sex difference does not disappear. What is more, the sex difference among adult males and females is almost exactly the same as that found by Cameron some *20 years* earlier, indicating a remarkable temporal stability for this difference or at least a remarkable coincidence.

An implication of these findings may be that males are actually *underrepresented* in this sample. As Cameron



points out:

The chance of being arrested is improved with each new item of merchandise stolen. Men, stealing on the whole fewer items...would be less likely to be seen than women (1953, p. 76).

Since, as we will discuss in another section, men are *overrepresented* in the sample, this may indicate an even greater male dominance in shoplifting in Bigstore.

#### b) The Value of Stolen Goods

Because of an error in data collection, mean values for the value of merchandise stolen are not available. This error<sup>2</sup> makes analysis of many of the questions concerning the value of goods stolen problematic.

The data do show that shoplifting does not involve, for the most part, thefts amounting to large sums of money. About 85 percent (521/610) of the sample had an item (or items) worth less than \$50.

We have seen that males and females, regardless of age, tend to steal different amounts of merchandise. We have also seen that males tend to steal fewer items, but of higher per-item value than the females.

When the subject's age is compared with the value of goods stolen, we find few notable differences between the relative percentages of juveniles and adults in the respective value categories, with two exceptions: the lowest and highest value-intervals.





TABLE 3

Relative Percentages of Persons, either Juvenile or Adult, Stealing Under \$5 and Over \$50 Worth of Merchandise.

	JUVENILE	ADULT
Under \$5	39.7% (100/252)	29.4% (105/357)
Over \$50	7.5% ( 19/252)	19% ( 69/357)

Table 3 indicates that juveniles tend to steal very low-value items more often than adults do. There are many cases in which youths steal items of little worth - such as candy or cigarettes.

Apparently adults and juveniles also differ when it comes to stealing high-value items. Here the adults predominate. Of all those stealing more than \$50 worth of merchandise, about 78 percent were adults (69/88). The average juvenile shoplifter is a more petty thief than the adult one.

However, a slightly different picture appears when we control for the sex of the offender.

In the category "under \$5", when controls for sex are introduced, the difference between *males* is just as great. Not so for the females, however.





TABLE 4

Juvenile or Adult Males/Females Stealing Under \$5  
Worth of Merchandise

	JUVENILE	ADULT
Male	45.3% (68/150)	30.7% (66/215)
Female	31.4% (32/102)	27.5% (39/142)

We can see from Table 4 that while there is almost a 15 percent difference between juvenile and adult males, insofar as their respective contributions to this lowest-value category are concerned, there is not a comparable difference between the females. In fact, there is only a small 3.9% difference between the female adults and juveniles.

In other words, it is *not* the case that juveniles as a group, when compared with adults, tend to be caught with very cheap merchandise. Rather, this is only true for the male *juveniles*.

Controlling for the sex of the offender also reveals an interesting difference in the next-higher value category (\$5 - 9.99). Where, in the original cross tabulation there was little difference between the percentage of all juveniles and all adults in this category (17.9% *vs.* 13.7% - a difference of only 4.2%), when broken down into the male/female dichotomy a more substantial difference is apparent.



TABLE 5

Juvenile or Adult Males/Females Stealing \$5 - 9.99  
Worth of Merchandise

	JUVENILE	ADULT
Male	22.7% (34/150)	11.2% (24/215)
Female	10.8% (11/102)	17.6% (25/142)

As seen in Table 5, male juveniles are stealing this value of goods more often than male adults are when compared to their respective totals. The data on females is just the opposite - the percentage of all adult females in this category being considerably higher than the percentage of all juvenile females.

These findings can be explained with respect to the type of items taken. Among males stealing goods worth \$5 - 9.99, the major difference between juveniles and adults appear in the category "audio" - 11 juveniles stole this type of item but only 1 adult did so (34% as opposed to 4% of their totals in this value category).

The situation of a single item-type accounting for the original difference between adults and juveniles is the same for females. Here the adults predominate, but when a control for item-type is introduced we see that most of this difference is due to the fact that 36 percent (9/25) of the adult females took food but none of the



juvenile females did. Also, the adult females take a wider variety of goods, being represented in several item categories such as "hardware" and "audio" which are male-dominated overall. None of the juvenile females who took goods worth \$5 - 9.99 are represented in these categories - in fact, most (64%: 7/11) of the females took costume jewellery in this value category.

Other categories do not show such differences. Up to the highest value category male and female juveniles and adults are represented in approximately equal proportions, with differences ranging from .1 to about 3 percent.

In the 50-dollars-or-more category, the aforementioned differences between juveniles and adults are still visible, but once again the males, this time the *adult* males, appear to account for most of the difference.

TABLE 6

Juvenile or Adult Males/Females Stealing \$50 or  
more Worth of Merchandise

	JUVENILE	ADULT
Male	4.7% ( 7/150)	20.9% (45/215)
Female	11.8% (12/102)	16.9% (24/142)

As seen above in Table 6, there is a difference of 16.2 percent in the respective proportions of adult and





juvenile males. This difference reduces to 5.1 percent when the contrast between juvenile and adult females is examined.

### Conclusions

The results show that juveniles, as a group, differ from adults in terms of the value of items they take. However, it is the *male* juveniles and adults who produce most of these age differences. In the lowest-value category there is a substantial difference between juvenile males and adult males, but little or none between juvenile females and adult females. At the opposite end of our value continuum, there is also a large difference between juvenile and adult males and a much smaller difference between the females defined as juvenile or adult.

In the first instance, it appears that male juveniles are more likely than male adults to steal items of very small value. In the second, the adult males are more likely than the juveniles to be stealing an expensive item (or items).

This difference connotes a maturational process on the part of males. When they are young they begin by stealing cheap items. When they are older they steal the expensive ones.

Of course, this is just a guess. A panel study would be required to ascertain whether the *same* individuals who steal small-value items graduate to large-value items.



In the present study we cannot know if the adults stealing high values of merchandise even shoplifted when they were young.<sup>3</sup>

A shortcoming of this analysis is that the type of merchandise taken is not controlled for. We see below that strong sex differences in the kind of goods stolen exist. Sex differences visible in the present analysis may be artifacts of the kind-of-item relationship. However, this control cannot be used because cell-sizes become too small for meaningful analysis.

#### c) Kinds of Items Taken

Shoplifters take a wide variety of items. Part of the problem with looking at the kinds of things they take is that it is nearly impossible to categorize them all. Bigstore carries a vast assortment of goods - and people steal some of almost everything.

There are patterns to what they take. Again we shall analyze our results in terms of our three most important variables - the offender's sex, age, and race.

Overall, the most frequently taken type of item is *food*. Prior to the type of item being recoded for purposes of analysis, there were 36 categories outlining the type of item taken.<sup>4</sup> When we look at this non-recoded data we see that 131 persons are apprehended with food. This number is almost *3 times* higher than the next most frequent category, jewellery, which contains 44 people. Other



popular items for theft include lingerie, blouses, etc. with 41 persons stealing such things, and records, tapes, and stereo equipment with 35 persons taking them.

When we crosstabulate by age, sex, and race, the variable that appears to make a difference is the sex of the offender. The other two variables do not produce large differences by themselves in terms of what kind of merchandise is taken.

For example, little difference is discernible when we related the relative percentages of juveniles and adults in the item-type categories. The *largest* difference between these groups is about 5 percent.

When sex is compared to the kind of item taken, the big differences appear in the kinds of items that have appeal to a specific sex.





TABLE 7

## Relative Percentages of Males and Females

## Taking Types of Items

TYPE OF ITEM	MALE	FEMALE
Jewellery	1.9% ( 7/366)	15.1% (37/245)
Shoes	2.7% (10/366)	4.1% (10/245)
Food	23.8% (87/366)	18.0% (44/245)
Female Clothing	1.9% ( 7/366)	30.6% (75/245)
Dress Accessories	12.0% (44/366)	6.5% (16/245)
Male Clothing	16.9% (62/366)	2.0% ( 5/245)
Hardware & Cameras	7.7% (28/366)	2.0% ( 5/245)
Audio (Tapes, Records & Equip.)	8.5% (31/366)	1.6% ( 4/245)
Sporting Goods	6.6% (24/366)	.4% ( 1/245)
Other	18.0% (66/366)	19.6% (48/245)

Table 7 shows that the differences between males and females are largest when the item being stolen appeals to only one gender. For example, 30.6 percent of all females took female clothing, while about 2 percent of males took this type of item. In the "male clothing" category the results are in the opposite direction; this time only 2 percent of the females, but about 17 percent of the males took this type of clothing.

The differences are even more striking when we look at the figures detailing what percent of persons in each





type-category were male or female.

TABLE 8

The Percent of Persons, either Male or Female,  
within a Type-of-Item Category.

TYPE OF ITEM	% MALE	% FEMALE
Jewellery	15.9% ( 7/ 44)	84.1% (37/ 44)
Shoes	50.0% (10/ 20)	50.0% (10/ 20)
Food	66.4% (87/131)	33.6% (44/131)
Female Clothing	8.5% ( 7/ 82)	91.5% (75/ 82)
Dress Accessories	73.3% (44/ 60)	26.7% (16/ 60)
Male Clothing	92.5% (62/ 67)	7.5% ( 5/ 67)
Hardware & Cameras	84.8% (28/ 33)	15.2% ( 5/ 33)
Audio (Tapes, Records & Equip.)	88.6% (31/ 35)	11.4% ( 4/ 35)
Sporting Goods	96.0% (24/ 25)	4.0% ( 1/ 25)
Other	57.9% (66/144)	42.1% (48/114)

The percentages presented in Table 8 represent the raw percentage of persons of either sex within a category. They must be analyzed in terms of the overall percentages of males and females; 59.9 percent and 40.1 percent, respectively. Even so we can see that the sexes are highly over-represented in the gender-specific item-type categories.

We have seen in a previous section that sex alone is sometimes not as good a descriptor as sex combined (or controlled) with another descriptive characteristic.



TABLE 9

Comparison of Male and Female Juveniles  
and Adults by Type of Item Stolen

	MALES		FEMALES	
	JUVENILE <sup>1</sup>	ADULT	JUVENILE <sup>1</sup>	ADULT
Jewellery	2.7% ( 4/150)	1.4% ( 3/216)	21.6% (22/102)	10.6% (15/142)
Shoes	2.7% ( 4/150)	2.8% ( 6/216)	6.9% ( 7/102)	2.1% ( 3/142)
Food	22.0% (33/150)	25.0% (54/216)	9.8% (10/102)	23.9% (34/142)
Female Clothing	1.3% ( 2/150)	2.3% ( 5/216)	28.4% (29/102)	31.7% (45/142)
Dress Accessories	8.7% (13/150)	14.4% (31/216)	5.9% ( 6/102)	7.0% (10/142)
Male Clothing	8.7% (13/150)	22.7% (49/216)	0.0% ( 0/102)	3.5% ( 5/142)
Hardware & Cameras	10.0% (15/150)	6.0% (13/216)	2.0% ( 2/102)	2.1% ( 3/142)
Audio	12.0% (18/150)	6.0% (13/216)	2.0% ( 2/102)	1.4% ( 2/142)
Sporting Goods	13.3% (20/150)	1.9% ( 4/216)	1.0% ( 1/102)	0.0% ( 0/142)
Other	18.7% (28/150)	17.6% (38/216)	22.5% (23/102)	17.6% (25/142)
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

<sup>1</sup>Under 18 years of age.



When the sex/theft-type relationship is controlled by the age of the subject (under 18 years or 18 years and over), as we see in Table 9, some differences present themselves. In regard to what is taken, the sex difference holds. In some of the sex-neutral categories, such as "food," some new differences emerge.

Males and females, be they under or over 18 years, still steal items that reflect their sex. But the juvenile/adult distinction does show that within their respective sexes, the age distinction for shoplifters does affect, once again *what they steal*.

For instance, female juveniles and adults differ considerably in the proportions that steal jewellery - 21.6 percent of juvenile females steal jewellery. Only 10.6 percent of adult females went for this item.

Looking again at females, we see that there is a large difference between adults and juveniles when it comes to stealing food. Almost 24 percent of the adult females stole this type of merchandise, but around 10 percent of the juvenile females had food in their possession when arrested. This 10 percent figure for juvenile females stands out since the figures for adult women are directly comparable to those for males, be they juvenile or adult (24%, 22%, and 25%, respectively). Young females do not bother themselves with foodstuffs.







Turning to the males, it can be seen that juveniles and adults diverge in terms of what they like to steal among the sex-specific items. Adult males like to steal male clothing more than juveniles do: 22.7 percent as opposed to 8.7 percent. But juvenile males steal sporting goods more than adult ones: 13.3 percent *vs.* 1.9 percent. These differences seem consistent with male interests within their respective age categories.

### Conclusion

The results indicate a sex differential in what people steal. There are also indications of differences when the interaction of sex and age upon type of merchandise taken is examined.

The results allow the construction of a tentative, but important hypothesis: Shoplifters in Bigstore tend to steal the kind of merchandise *they might normally buy*. Males steal male clothing, females steal female clothing, juvenile males steal sporting goods, juvenile females steal costume jewellery: all these findings lend support to this hypothesis.

Another conclusion that springs from the above hypothesis is that, if it is true that most shoplifters steal the things their sex and age indicate they would tend to buy for themselves, then it is possible that most are stealing *for their own use*. If this is a reasonable conclusion, then support is given to previous research that indicates that



most shoplifters are not stealing in order to sell the merchandise they take.

#### d) Style of Theft

The way a shoplifter steals is a function of what he or she is *wearing* or *carrying*. By this is meant that shoplifting often (but not always) involves the concealment of merchandise.

The most frequently used hiding place for stolen items is under clothing: 158 persons (25.9 percent) in the present sample used this method. The "under clothing" method includes stuffing merchandise into one's pants, hiding it under a coat, or putting it up a sleeve.

The next popular means the shoplifter uses is simply putting the items into a pocket: 132 persons (21.6 percent) stole in this manner.

Stuffing items into a shopping bag is the third most popular style of theft. Here about 106 persons (17.3 percent) are represented.

It makes intuitive sense that since the clothing one wears and what one carries determines what choice one has for concealment, that the sex of the shoplifter will influence the style of theft utilized. Some people steal by putting goods in a purse - however, very few men carry purses as a matter of habit.

Due to the way they dress, many females prefer to steal merchandise using something they are carrying. Men,



on the other hand, stuff items under clothing or into their pockets.

TABLE 10  
The Style of Theft by Sex

	MALE	FEMALE
Purse	.3% ( 1/350)	8.5% (20/235)
Shopping Bag	11.4% ( 40/350)	28.1% (66/235)
Other Bag	3.7% ( 13/350)	9.4% (22/235)
Pocket	27.4% ( 96/350)	15.3% (36/235)
Put Item On	7.1% ( 25/350)	6.0% (14/235)
Under Clothes	33.1% (116/350)	17.9% (42/235)
Other	16.9% ( 59/350)	14.9% (35/235)

The sex differences depicted in Table 10 are altered somewhat when age is controlled for, but only inasmuch as age influences what people wear.

For example in style of theft categories dominated by males, such as "pockets" and "under clothing", the proportion of females increases drastically when we look only at juveniles. Overall, 15.3 percent of the females stole by putting items in a pocket but 21 percent of all juvenile females and 11 percent of adult females did so. A similar situation exists in the "under clothing" category: in general, 17.9 percent of the females steal this way, but 22.2 percent of the *juvenile* females do, compared with





14.7 percent of the adult females.

These results show the relationship between how one dresses and how one steals. That is, many female juveniles dress like males (jackets, jeans or slacks, etc.) while fewer older females do so.

No great differences were apparent when the race of the offender was examined along with the style of theft. Neither did controls for the offender's race contribute to any major changes in relative percentages stealing in certain styles.

### Conclusions

As has been pointed out elsewhere, not a single instance of "professionalism" was found among the 611 cases of this study. A category that covered indications of *preparation* in the style of theft existed, but nobody fell into it.

The vast majority of shoplifters are amateurs who do not prepare themselves for their stealing forays. The fact that there are differences between shoplifters in how they steal as a function of what they wear or carry does not really tell us much. Although we know that no subtle preparation is involved, such as the making of booster boxes or the sewing of large pockets into coat-liners, we do not know if some rudimentary preparation took place.

It is impossible to ascertain, for example, whether those carrying a shopping bag always do so when they shop, or merely carried one in order to place stolen merchandise in it.





In sum, it can only be stated with certainty that there were no shoplifters caught in Bigstore who gave ostensive indications that they were anything but amateur thieves.

#### B. Characteristics of Shoplifters

In this section the emphasis is upon *who* the shoplifter is. This emphasis means that variables such as the shoplifter's age, sex, race, and socio-economic status are the characteristics which are examined. Also, there is a section describing the characteristics of shoplifters who have no permanent address in Edmonton and are thus excluded from the analysis that utilizes ecological measures.

TABLE 11

Age, Sex, and Racial Composition of The Bigstore Sample

AGE AND SEX		WHITE	NATIVE	OTHER NON-WHITE	TOTALS
<u>MALE</u>					
MEN	(18+)	158 (26%)	43 (7%)	14 (2%)	215 (35%)
BOYS	(-18)	120 (20%)	22 (4%)	8 (1%)	150 (25%)
<u>FEMALE</u>					
WOMEN	(18+)	116 (19%)	14 (2%)	10 (2%)	140 (23%)
GIRLS	(-18)	70 (12%)	27 (4%)	4 (1%)	101 (17%)
<u>TOTALS</u>		464 (77%)	106 (17%)	36 (6%)	N=606*

\* Number of missing observations = 5.



a) Age

1) Adult/Juvenile Ratio

As Table 11 indicates, about 42% (251/606) of the sample from Bigstore are under 18 years of age, so 58% are 18 years or older. The 1977 Civic Census<sup>5</sup> indicates that 28 percent of Edmonton's population is under 18 years; 72 percent being 18 years or over.

The 1977 Civic Census shows juveniles to be *over-represented* in the Bigstore sample by a factor of 14 percent. Adults are *underrepresented* by the same factor.

TABLE 12

A Comparison of the Age Distribution of Bigstore  
Sample with 1976 Census Estimates

AGE	CENSUS (%)	BIGSTORE SAMPLE (%)	DIFFERENCE (%)
0 - 4	8	0.0	- 8.0
5 - 9	8	2.3	- 5.7
10 - 14	10	18.2	+ 8.2
15 - 19	11	27.3	+16.3
20 - 24	12	13.7	+ 1.7
25 - 29	10	8.5	- 1.5
30 - 34	7	4.9	- 2.1
35 - 39	6	3.3	- 2.7
40 - 44	6	3.3	- 2.7
45 - 49	5	4.3	- .7

continued...



TABLE 12 (continued)

50 - 54	5	3.6	- 1.4
55 - 59	4	3.4	- .6
60 - 64	3	1.5	- 1.5
65 - 69	2	2.1	+ .1
70 - 74	2	1.5	- .5
75 +	2	2.0	0.0

As we see in Table 12 above, when the age distribution is broken down into intervals and compared with 1976 Census data, certain ages are overrepresented, but most ages are very close to the Census figures. The outstanding age category is the "15 to 19" group, which represents a 16.3% difference from the Census data, indicating considerable overrepresentation. The two adjacent age intervals, "10 - 14" and "20 - 24" are also overrepresented, but not to as large an extent.

There are 167 persons in the 15-19 age-group. Of these: 35 percent (58) are 15 years, 25 percent (41) are 16, 17 percent (28) are 17, 11 percent (19) are 18, and 13 percent (21) are 19 years of age. In short, about 77 percent of this overrepresented age group are under 18 years of age. Notice too, that the 15 to 19 year old age category is also the one most disproportionately represented in Cameron's data (1953, p. 85A).





## 2) Social Theft

The literature suggests that juveniles more often than adults are apprehended in groups. The Bigstore data lend support to this contention.

Differences between adults and juveniles are evident, even when controls are introduced for the sex and race of the offender.

In general, while about 89 percent of the adults (319/358) are alone when apprehended, about 42 percent (106/251) of the juveniles were not with others when arrested.

This finding, of course, reflects the social patterns of these two groups: youngsters being peer-oriented but adults being much less so inclined.

## Conclusions

While in the total view there is an overrepresentation of juveniles when compared to Census data, most of the difference is attributable to the "15 to 19" age group. Since 77 percent of this age category in the Bigstore sample is under 18 years of age, it seems reasonable that the older juveniles (15 to 17 years) contribute the greatest amount to this overrepresentation.

Another interesting finding in this regard is the fact that this age group is also overrepresented in Cameron's sample. This indicates that this particular shoplifting pattern has not changed much in two decades; remarkable



when one considers the many changes which have taken place in our society during that period of time.

#### b) Sex

It is pointed out in this study's review of the literature that there is no consistent finding as to the male/female ratio of shoplifters. There is, however, a commonly-held belief that more women than men indulge in this form of crime.

The findings of the present study contradict this belief. As shown in Table 11, males comprise roughly 60 percent of the sample, females, of course, comprising the remaining 40 percent.

According to the 1976 Census, there are (or perhaps more correctly, *were*) 278,225 males in Edmonton out of a total population of 554,230 or about 50 percent.<sup>6</sup> There are, says the Census, a few *more* females than males in this city: it records 276,000 females in Edmonton, also about 50 percent, but with a difference of a little over 2,000 females.

In comparison with this information, males in Bigstore are *overrepresented* among thieving shoppers by a factor of 10 percent. Alternatively females are *underrepresented* among thieves by an equal factor.

However, we cannot be sure that population figures reflect the population of those *in the store* and thus *at-risk* of being arrested. A rough measure of the sex



characteristics of the store population is gained through a tally of such characteristics made as persons enter the store.

The door-count showed that the Bigstore population does not reflect the Edmonton population as a whole. Over the 10 one-hour periods (randomly chosen), in which the counting was done, females maintained a consistent 2 to 1 ratio over males. In total 1,061 males and 2,150 females were counted coming into Bigstore, the exact ratio being 1 male for every 2.03 females.<sup>7</sup>

TABLE 13

A Comparison of the Sex and Age of Bigstore Shoplifters with 1977 Civic Census Estimates

SEX	AGE	BIGSTORE	CENSUS	% DIFFERENCE
MALES	JUVENILE	24.5% (150/611)	14% (67,779/471,474)	+10.5
	ADULT	35.4% (216/611)	36% (168,689/471,474)	- .6
FEMALES	JUVENILE	16.9% (103/611)	14% (64,236/471,474)	+ 2.9
	ADULT	23.2% (142/611)	36% (170,770/471,474)	-12.8

However, when controls are introduced for the age of the offender the picture is altered. As shown in Table 13, the disproportionate representation of males among thieves





is entirely due to the overrepresentation of the juveniles of the gender. Female juveniles are overrepresented in comparison with Census figures, but not considerably so. Adults, both male and female, are underrepresented. Adult females are underrepresented to a significant degree.

### Conclusions

All measures of population show males to be disproportionately apprehended in Bigstore. Census data show the Edmonton population to be about 50 percent male. A door-tally points to an underrepresentation of males in the store population (1 out of every 3 persons entering the store). Since 60 percent of the apprehended sample is male, it is reasonable to conclude that males are arrested disproportionately to their numbers at risk. When sex is categorized by age and compared with census estimates, however, it appears that the overrepresentation of males is due to the contribution of male *juveniles*.



### c) Race

#### 1) Racial Composition

The two largest racial categories are "Whites" and "Natives",<sup>8</sup> making up 77 and 17 percent of apprehended shoplifters, respectively. The "other non-whites" category aggregates such diverse racial groups as Pakistanis, Blacks, Chinese, and other Asians, and makes up the remaining 6 percent of the arrested shoplifters.

Obtaining estimates of the populations of these three racial groups proved almost impossible. The Census chooses to classify people in terms of their country of origin rather than by any racial indicators.

Nevertheless, we do have some estimates available. The 1971 Census records Edmonton as having 4,260 persons of Indian, Eskimo, and Metis heritage, or about 10 percent of the total population at that time.<sup>9</sup> Since natives in the Bigstore sample of thieves constitute about 17 percent of all apprehended shoplifters, it can be concluded that they are *overrepresented* among apprehended shoplifters.

In another measure of ethnicity, the ostensive characteristics of shoppers in Bigstore were counted. This time the characteristics under scrutiny were based on a white/non-white dichotomy. Again, a random selection of 10 hours observing time made up the count.

The contention that non-whites are overrepresented among apprehended thieves is supported. A total of 152



entrants who were non-whites were counted during the observation period compared with 2,707 whites counted during the same period of time.

This means that among store entrants whites outnumber non-whites 18 to 1. Thus, while about 6 percent of store shoppers are not white, they constitute 23 percent of apprehended thieves.

### Conclusions

Comparison of arrested "natives" with a rough population estimate indicates that this racial category is overrepresented in arrest figures. However, no *in-store* population estimate is available for the "native" category alone.

Our in-store population measure enables the comparison of the proportions of arrested whites and *non-whites* with the proportions at risk of shoplifting. In this case non-whites in general, not just the "natives", appear to be disproportionately apprehended.

#### b. Race and Disposition

Research by Cohen and Stark (1974), Hindelang (1974), and Lundman (1978) focuses upon factors which influence a store detective's decision to prosecute a shoplifter. In general, these studies have found that the value of stolen goods is the best predictor of police referral. They agree that the higher the value of items taken, the greater the likelihood of prosecution, irrespective of extra-legal





attributes such as the thief's race.

For the present analysis the pertinent groups for comparison are "whites" and "natives" (meaning persons of Indian or Metis ancestry). In previous studies, "blacks" and "whites" and "non-whites" are compared. In the Bigstore study the "native" group is the largest homogeneous minority available for comparison with whites.

We have seen that Indians and Metis are disproportionately represented in the arrest figures of Bigstore. It remains to be seen if they are also referred to the police for prosecution in disproportionate numbers.

TABLE 14

Disposition by Race

	WHITE	NATIVE
PROSECUTED	41.6% (193/464)	59.8% (64/107)
NOT PROSECUTED	58.4% (271/464)	40.2% (43/107)

Table 14 shows a considerable difference between whites and natives in terms of prosecution. Approximately 42 percent of whites were referred to the police while nearly 60 percent of natives were treated this way - a difference of about 18 percent.

Cohen and Stark (1974) also found considerable differences between the racial groups they compared.



However, when they controlled for the value of the items taken differences between blacks and whites disappeared in the "over \$30" category (p. 30).

This finding is not replicated in the Bigstore data. While it is true that a higher proportion of whites are prosecuted in this higher-value classification, a similarly higher proportion of natives have charges placed against them.

TABLE 15  
Disposition by Race by Value of Stolen Goods

VALUE	DISPOSITION	RACE	
		WHITE	NATIVE
UNDER \$30	PROSECUTED	34% (122/359)	51% (41/80)
	NOT PROSECUTED	66% (237/359)	48% (39/80)
\$30+	PROSECUTED	68% ( 71/105)	85% (22/26)
	NOT PROSECUTED	32% ( 34/105)	15% ( 4/26)

The percentage difference between whites and natives being prosecuted is 17 percent within both value categories. The difference did not change *regardless of the value of items stolen.*

There are no outstanding differences between prosecution rates for males and females. This finding is



replicated by Lundman (1978, p. 399), and is also in keeping with earlier research (e.g., Hindelang, 1974).

But when controls are added to the race/disposition relationship for *both* the value of the goods stolen and the sex of the offender, some differences emerge.

TABLE 16

Percent Prosecuted by Race - Controlling for the  
Value of Stolen Goods and the Offender's Sex

SEX	VALUE	DISPOSITION	RACE	
			WHITE	NATIVE
MALES	UNDER \$30	PROSECUTED	35% (76/215)	50% (24/48)
	\$30+	PROSECUTED	76% (48/ 63)	81% (13/16)
FEMALES	UNDER \$30	PROSECUTED	32% (46/144)	53% (17/32)
	\$30+	PROSECUTED	55% (23/ 42)	90% ( 9/10)

Looking at Table 16, we see that, among males stealing over \$30 in merchandise, differences in disposition attributed to race have disappeared. About an equal percentage of white and native males who steal high-valued merchandise is prosecuted (76 and 81 percent, respectively). However,





large differences still show themselves for all other categories of value.

A variable that is also considered in other research is the age of the shoplifter. This variable is always divided into two categories: "juveniles" (those younger than 18 years) and "adult" (those 18 years or older).

Simply adding this variable to the disposition/race relationship does not produce any change in the differential prosecution of natives.

TABLE 17  
Disposition by Race Controlling for Age

		RACE	
	DISPOSITION	WHITE	NATIVE
JUVENILE	PROSECUTED	34% ( 64/190)	49% (24/49)
	NOT PROSECUTED	66% (126/190)	51% (25/49)
ADULT	PROSECUTED	47% (129/274)	68% (39/57)
	NOT PROSECUTED	53% (145/274)	32% (18/57)

Table 17 shows that large differences remain between prosecuted whites and natives. There is a difference of about 15 percent among juvenile whites and natives, and one of 21 percent between adult whites and natives.

When the value of the theft is also considered in the above relationship, differences remain among juvenile whites



and natives in both value categories. Differences in disposition are also evident among adults stealing less than \$30 in merchandise.

TABLE 18

Disposition by Race Controlling for Age  
and Value of Stolen Goods

VALUE	DISPOSITION	AGE	RACE	
			WHITE	NATIVE
UNDER \$30	PROSECUTED	JUVENILE	31% (50/161)	40% (17/42)
		ADULT	36% (72/200)	63% (24/38)
\$30+	PROSECUTED	JUVENILE	50% (14/28)	100% ( 7/ 7)
		ADULT	74% (57/77)	78% (14/18)

As shown in Table 18, however, the differences between natives and whites disappear when we look at *adults* stealing more than \$30 worth of merchandise. This finding replicates that of Cohen and Stark (1974, p. 35). About 74 percent of adult whites and 78 percent of adult natives who stole goods worth \$30 or more were prosecuted.



TABLE 19

Percentage Prosecuted by Race of Offender,  
Controlling for Sex, Age, and Value of the Theft

VALUE	SEX	AGE	RACE	
			WHITE	NATIVE
UNDER \$30	MALE	JUVENILE	30% (32/105)	27% ( 6/22)
		ADULT	40% (44/110)	69% (18/26)
	FEMALE	JUVENILE	31% (18/ 57)	55% (11/20)
		ADULT	32% (28/ 87)	50% ( 6/12)
	MALE	JUVENILE	53% ( 8/ 15)	0% ( 0 )
		ADULT	83% (40/ 48)	81% (13/16)
\$30+	FEMALE	JUVENILE	46% ( 6/ 13)	100% ( 7/ 7)
		ADULT	59% (17/ 29)	50% ( 1/ 2)

When simultaneous controls are introduced for age, sex, and value of goods (Table 19), new patterns present themselves.<sup>10</sup> Table 19 reveals that the previous findings that a large difference exists in the percentage of all native and white males prosecuted for stealing less than \$30 in merchandise is modified. There is little difference between *juvenile* white and native males in percentage





prosecuted, (30% and 27%, respectively). The original difference is due to the differential prosecution of native male adults - 69 percent of these persons were prosecuted.

In the "\$30+" value category, Table 19 indicates that adult male whites and natives do *not* differ substantially in vulnerability to prosecution. Whites are slightly more likely to be prosecuted than natives: 83 percent versus 81 percent.

It is pertinent to note at this point that the value of items stolen *does* enter into the decision to prosecute. We have seen above that value causes the differences in prosecution of adult male whites and natives to disappear. When these two sub-populations are compared across value categories, a large increase in prosecution is evident for both races as value of stolen merchandise increases. About 40 percent of adult male whites and 69 percent of adult male natives are prosecuted in the lower value category. About 83 and 81 percent of these same groups are prosecuted in the higher value category. These represent percentage differences of 43 percent for adult male whites, and 22 percent for adult male natives. Such increases in liability to prosecution between the lower and higher value categories are visible for nearly all the groups. The precise impact of value in the prosecution decision cannot be ascertained at present because of the small cell frequencies in the higher value category (most particularly among the natives).



We are still left with large differences in relative percentages prosecuted among groups stealing *less than \$30* in merchandise. These differences are largest between:

	% Difference
1) Male adult whites and natives	29
2) Female juvenile whites and natives	24
3) Female adult whites and natives	18

Cohen and Stark find that differences in disposition for those stealing less than \$30 in merchandise are ultimately attributable to a correlation of sex and unemployment for the *adult males* of their study (1974, p. 35). They do not mention females at all.

If we do essentially the same analysis on the adult males of the present study, differences do *not* disappear between natives and whites. There are 47 persons (8 percent) who meet the criteria of: 1) stealing under \$30 worth of goods, 2) being male, 3) being adult, and 4) being unemployed. Of all those who are white, adult, unemployed males, 64% are prosecuted. This compares with 75% prosecuted among those stealing similar amounts, but who are native, adult, and unemployed.<sup>11</sup>

### Conclusions

Despite numerous attempts to introduce controls to explain the large differences between whites and natives in being prosecuted, I failed to find a variable or combination of variables that removed this differential



for all categories of persons and value.

Some of the control variables do change our picture of differential prosecution, but none eliminate differences across all categories of Bigstore's shoplifters.

A partial explanation may be that in certain circumstances the store detectives do not view prosecution as a punitive exercise.<sup>12</sup> I believe this to be particularly true in their attitude toward native females. Store detectives view prosecution for such offenders as a means of acquiring "help" for individuals rather than punishment. White store detectives perceive native females as lacking the family and community support that white females have. Thus they prosecute in order to bring official "helpers" to the aid of these persons.

This is an impression gained from informal conversations while working with store detectives. It is not an assumption confirmed by formal attitudinal measures. However, this is yet another hypothesis for other research, as suggested in the final chapter.





#### d) Socio-Economic Status

Several rough measures of socio-economic status have been applied to the shoplifters caught in Bigstore. The first is based upon shoplifter's residence. Another measure (related to the first) is census data (1971) on average family income in the areas where the shoplifters live. A third measure is based upon what they do for a living.

All of these measures are problematic. In the first place, as we have mentioned, there are good reasons for doubting the veracity of both the shoplifter's stated address and employment.

Second, the income measure is an ecological one. That is, an average family income figure is attached to a shoplifter's stated address, but this figure is an average for the *area* around that address. In this analysis we may fall prey to the *ecological fallacy*. As Nettler points out:

The ecological fallacy is the error of assuming that associations found among events when one has studied aggregates will also be found when one studies individuals. It is the mistake of believing that goes with what when we compare areas will necessarily be found when we compare individuals (1978, p. 137).



Unfortunately a lack of alternatives forces the measurement of social status using these weak and problematic instruments. The stronger measures of status, such as educational achievement and actual income figures, are not available in Bigstore's records.

#### 1) Ecological Data

When the addresses of shoplifters are correlated with census tracts and plotted upon a map of Edmonton, there appears to be clustering of shoplifter's in the city's inner core. This clustering is particularly evident in core areas adjacent to Bigstore (see Map 1).

In their classic study of crime rates in urban areas, Shaw and McKay (1942) found that arrests were concentrated in central city areas. While Edmonton's central core area is probably not in the state of decay - both social and environmental - that Chicago is depicted to be in the Shaw and McKay study, it is still an older, less affluent area of the city.

The clustering of Bigstore's shoplifters in these central areas may be indicative of a generally lower social and economic status for them.

#### 2) Income data

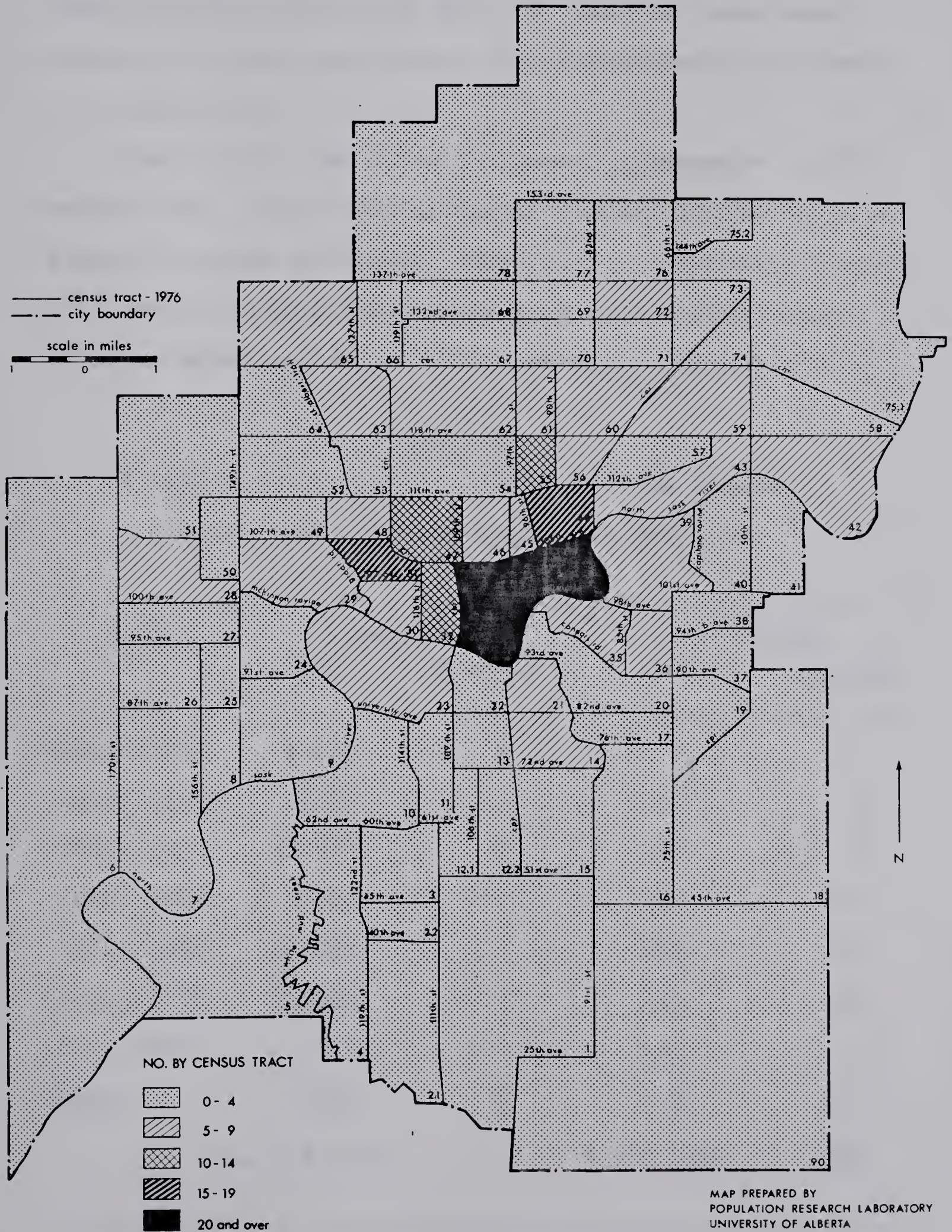
The income figures for this study are based on 1971 census reports on the average family income of persons living within enumeration areas in the city. The enumeration area is the smallest political division of the city,





## MAP 1

Number of Arrested Shoplifters by Census Tract.







comprising approximately 200 persons, usually within a 2 to 4-block area. Although one is still in danger of committing the ecological fallacy, many of these small enumeration areas are likely to be homogeneous in income characteristics.

The average total family income in Edmonton in 1971 was \$10,660. Since the estimated average figure for the Bigstore sample is \$9,516, there is no outstanding overall difference between the incomes of areas in which shoplifters reside and those of the Edmonton population.

TABLE 20

A Comparison of Average Family Income Figures  
Between the Bigstore Sample and Edmonton

INCOME	EDMONTON		BIGSTORE	
	NO.	PERCENT	NO.	PERCENT
UNDER \$2000	4,630	4	0	0
2000- 2999	4,405	4	0	0
3000- 4999	10,255	9	10	3
5000- 6999	13,690	12	49	13
7000- 9999	29,920	25	177	48
10000-14999	35,380	30	115	31
15000-19999	12,250	10	12	3
20000+	<u>7,795</u>	7	<u>6</u>	<u>2</u>
	N = 118,325		N = 369	100



As Table 20 indicates, Bigstore shoppers with permanent addresses tend to have incomes in the "upper-lower" class, and "lower-middle" class income strata. That is, they are *underrepresented* in comparison with overall city family income estimates in the lowest income categories. No shopper lived in an area where the average family income was under \$3,000. One can assume that these would be areas of extreme poverty.

The shoppers are significantly *overrepresented* in the \$7,000 - \$9,999 income category, with a difference of 23 percent between the sample and the city estimates.

A trend toward *underrepresentation* is shown at the upper end of the income continuum. A percentage difference of 7 percent in the \$15,000 - \$19,000 and 5 percent in the \$20,000 or over category indicates substantially less of the shoppers tend to come from areas of higher income.

### Conclusions

The large number of shoppers who come from the income categories between \$7,000 and \$15,000 lends support to Cameron's contention that most shoppers are from the "respectable working classes" (1953, p. 107).

In the present study, the income information is so fragmentary and questionable that the drawing of a strong conclusion may not be warranted. For example, since the analysis is based on data that comes, in the first instance, from the permanent Edmonton address of the shopper,



persons *without* such an address are excluded from the analysis. Income estimates cannot be ascertained for such persons and unfortunately they make up a significant proportion of the sample (about 34 percent). It is argued in another section that these persons differ considerably from those who do have a permanent address, and so represent a distinct sub-population. Since it is likely that the incomes of the shoplifters without a permanent address are low, our figures would differ to a large degree if they were included in the tally.

There are indications that shoplifters with a permanent address tend to come from working-class areas. This working-class "bias" is also reflected in what the Bigstore shoplifters who work do for a living.

### 3) Employment

The value of measuring a person's status by his or her job is a problematic procedure. For example, how can one determine status from an occupation like "keeping house" or "student"? These types of occupations are engaged in by persons of nearly every socio-economic status - they cross class boundaries, and are more likely indicative of age or sex than "class".

The analysis of occupations is best done, given the Bigstore data, in terms of the age differential "juvenile" (under 18 years) and "adult" (18 year or over), since age does play a large role in determining what a person does for an occupation.





TABLE 21

Occupation Classifications of Bigstore's  
Shoplifters

OCCUPATION	NO.	PERCENT
Professional & Managerial	15	3
Skilled Labour	31	5
Unskilled Labour	65	11
Students	207	37
Keeping House	24	4
Retired	41	7
Clerical	16	3
Sales	9	2
Unemployed	158	28
Other	3	1
	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>
	N = 569	100%



TABLE 22

Occupation Classifications by Age for the  
Bigstore Sample

OCCUPATION	JUVENILE		ADULT	
	NO.	PERCENT	NO.	PERCENT
Professional & Managerial	0	0	15	5
Skilled Labour	3	1	28	8
Unskilled Labour	5	2	60	18
Students	192	80	15	5
Keeping House	1	1	23	7
Retired	0	0	41	12
Clerical	4	2	12	4
Sales	2	1	7	2
Unemployed	34	14	124	38
Other	0	0	3	1
TOTALS	241	100	328	100%
	(42%)		(58%)	



When comparing Table 21 and 22 the difference that age makes for occupations stands out. Most juvenile shoplifters are either going to school or are unemployed. While few adult shoplifters are going to school, most are either unemployed, working as unskilled labour, or retired.

In general all job classifications other than "student" are dominated by adults. For instance, 90 percent of the skilled labourers and 92 percent of the unskilled labourers are adults, and 100 percent of those in professional or managerial positions are over 18 years of age.

Among adults, the two largest occupational categories are "unemployed" and "unskilled labour", representing 18 and 38 percent of all adults, respectively. So 54 percent of adult shoplifters are either without a job or are doing a job requiring no technical skill. Only 15 out of 328 adults, (5 percent) do jobs that can be classified as professional or managerial.

### Conclusions

The data on occupations accords with our tentative findings on income - namely that shoplifters are mostly from the lower to lower-middle strata in the job hierarchy.

In general we have found that shoplifters come from the older, core areas of the city, they have lower-middle income characteristics, and they are either out of work or in manual labour.

This picture of the average shoplifter is consistent with Cameron's.





### e) Peripatetic Shoplifters

As pointed out above, many of Bigstore's shoplifters do not have a permanent address in Edmonton on which ecological measures of variables can be based. A total of 200 apprehended persons (35 percent;  $N = 573$ ) do not live anywhere in this city on a permanent basis. These persons fall into two major categories: 1) those with no fixed address whatsoever, and 2) those with a permanent address outside the city, but within the province.

It is likely that these two categories represent different, but not mutually exclusive, groups. Most of the "no fixed address" persons will be transients. Some of those listing permanent addresses outside the city may also be transients, but the precise proportion is impossible to calculate. The problem is one of discerning between those persons who are visitors and those who are actually living in the city on an itinerant basis.

Evidence suggests, however, that most of the "permanent address outside Edmonton" group *are* visitors. This group approximately reflects the characteristics of the persons arrested in Bigstore who have permanent addresses within the city boundaries, except they tend to be a little younger. This is not true of the "no fixed address" category as shall be discussed below.

Other evidence that this group is coming from homes outside the city is available when the time of apprehension



is examined. Of those living outside Edmonton but in the province of Alberta, 80 percent (52/65) are caught during the afternoon. Only 3 percent (2/65) are caught during the evening. About 71 percent (410/573) of the sample as a whole is caught during the afternoons.

A reasonable interpretation of this finding may be that these persons are travelling to and from the city during the morning and evening, respectively. They are overrepresented in afternoon apprehensions because that is when many of them are shopping (and shoplifting) in the store.

This group is probably made up of rural and suburban, "bedroom community" dwellers. This would account for their sex, age, and racial characteristics being similar to the permanent-address shoplifters in Edmonton.

The "no fixed address" shoplifters represent a group apart, however. They are, it shall be argued, mostly vagrant, destitute people who are so often drawn to the downtown areas of large cities.

Most of those persons without an Edmonton address have no permanent address at all (56 percent). They are disproportionately male (90 percent) and adult (87 percent).

Anyone spending time downtown has probably run across these people: the panhandling, dishevelled, and transient males who frequent these areas. This group of shoplifters is unique to the downtown stores - few can get to the



peripheral suburban shopping complexes.

TABLE 23

A Comparison of Value of Stolen Goods Taken  
by Transients with Value Taken by Population

VALUE	BIGSTORE SAMPLE	NO FIXED ADDRESS
UNDER \$30	76% (466/611)	68% (77/113)
\$30+	24% (144/611)	32% (36/113)

Table 23 compares the value stolen by the Bigstore population with that taken by those with no fixed address. The transient group steals more valuable items: 24 percent of the population as a whole took goods worth \$30 or more, but 32 percent of the transients took this much.

The proportion of these two groups in the number-of-items categories does not differ outstandingly. One can only conclude that some of these persons take more valuable items than the general shoplifting population.

The single most common item these transient shoplifters take is food, with 26 percent of their total stealing this item. This is a bit misleading. From my experiences on the floor and with the apprehension records, a large percentage of those classified as stealing "food" are actually stealing an intoxicant, namely Extract of Vanilla.





I believe that the figures on the number of persons having no fixed address are probably accurate. Although some may feel they will avoid repercussions at home if they lie, knowledge of the bad consequences of not having a permanent address should outweigh this pressure.<sup>13</sup>

Being transient is *not* healthy in terms of what happens to you. Bigstore's detectives prosecute around 72 percent of persons having no fixed address. This figure is to be compared with only 38 percent of those having a permanent home, and 45 percent of the entire sample.

Not only are they prosecuted at a higher rate than others, the transients are also disproportionately *jailed*. Of the prosecuted transients, 24 percent received a jail sentence. This figure represents 49 percent of all persons who received such a sentence.

Obviously other factors are at work here. The transients do tend to steal more expensive items. Also, since no information is available on past criminal records, we cannot say for sure what role this information plays.

### Conclusions

Two types of shoplifters fall under the rubric "peripatetic". The first closely resembles the bulk of the shoplifting population, but comes into the city from other parts of the province.

The second type is the transient shoplifter. This group is probably in closest touch with the criminal



elements in Edmonton. They are the rootless, often inebriated adult males one sees wandering about in the downtown areas of many major cities. Some may be professional shoplifters, although this is not evident from their style of theft. Some part of the transient group steals valuable items. It is certainly not those stealing food, and a reasonable conclusion is that a small minority of the transients account for the most of this valuable stolen merchandise.



## FOOTNOTES

1. Both the present study and Cameron's defined "adult" and "juvenile" as being 18 years and older or under 18 years, respectively.
2. The writer constructed categories into which the various values of stolen goods were *coded*. This categorization rendered ratio-level data into ordinal or nominal data. That is, intervals were set up with corresponding codes designating these intervals - the data were placed in these intervals rather than being recorded as originally priced.
3. The writer feels safe in assuming they did so. In the biographies of many famous thieves this maturational process in crimes is well-documented (e.g., Willie Sutton's biography *Where the Money Was*, 1976).
4. The type of item represents the kind of merchandise having the highest total value in comparison to other items taken.
5. In the 1977 Civic Census, the total population of Edmonton is 471,474 persons. Of this total 67,779 males and 64,236 females are under 18 years of age.
6. The 1977 Civic Census also shows that about 50 percent (235,006/471,474) are female and 50 percent (236,468/471,474) are male.





7. The door-count measure is inexact. Shopper population probably changes from week-to-week and from year-to-year. Therefore, the two-week period used for this measure is not a reliable measure of the store population.
8. "Natives" is used in this study to denote Indian, Eskimo, and Metis persons.
9. In pointing out that natives constitute about 10% of Edmonton's population, Silverman (1977, p. 6) remarks upon the weakness of these data, citing *under-enumeration* of natives to be a common fault of the census.
10. Some of the differences visible in Table 19 are misleading, due to insufficient cell size. For example, of persons stealing over \$30 in merchandise who are female adults, 59% of the whites but 50% of the natives are prosecuted. However, the "native" category in this case represents only two persons. The problem of cell-size is prominent in analysis that calls for the introduction of numerous control variables.
11. This difference may not be significant when the small N (47) is considered.
12. Detectives are given individual responsibility for the prosecution decisions, although a supervisor's advice is always available. It should also be noted that my observations are of the behavior of *different* detectives than those who arrested and processed the sample. The conclusions may not apply to these former personnel.



13. This assumes that jail is viewed as a "bad consequence" by such transients. This assumption may be questionable because a jail term, especially during an Edmonton winter, may not be considered "bad" at all.



CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has two parts. The first part summarizes the finding in Chapter Four. The second part discusses some of the deficiencies and contributions of the study.

A. A Summary of the Findings

The major goal of this study is to describe the apprehended shoplifter as he or she exists in a western Canadian city. Consequently, the findings are discussed in terms of variables applicable to this description.

a. Age. The analysis of the age characteristics of arrested shoplifters shows juveniles to be disproportionately represented in comparison with their population frequency. This finding is in accord with that of much of the literature regarding the age characteristics of shoplifters (e.g., Cameron, 1953; Robin, 1963; and Normandeau, 1971).

When an interval-by-interval comparison is done between the age frequencies of the shoplifters and the population of Edmonton in general, the age category that comprises all 15-to-19-years-old is most overrepresented. This finding is duplicated in Cameron's research (1953).

The Bigstore findings also corroborate previous ones in showing the juvenile group to be practitioners of social theft at a higher rate than adults. Juveniles are more often caught shoplifting while they are with other persons





than adults are. This finding is replicated for all types of criminal activity on the part of juveniles. As Hood and Sparks point out:

There is no doubt that the vast majority of early and mid-adolescent delinquency is carried out in groups. In the United States, Shaw and McKay found that nearly 90 percent of offenders had accomplices; the Glueks found 70 percent. There have been similar results in Germany, Switzerland, France, England, and Scandinavia. Nearly all these studies, which have been of convicted delinquents, have found the normal number of persons involved to be two or three. They have also shown that as delinquents grow older they are more likely to be alone, but until their twenties over half of offenders are still likely to have known associates (1970, p. 87).

Here we see a clear parallel between the characteristics of the juvenile shoplifters in Bigstore and those of juvenile delinquents in general.

b. Sex. The data on the sex of shoplifters contradicts the findings of other shoplifting studies in which females are depicted as dominating the apprehension records. In this study males are dominant. Male shoplifters are



overrepresented with respect to both Census and in-store estimates.

When we obtain a sex and age breakdown for Bigstore data and compare this to Census estimates, juvenile males appear to account for the overrepresentation of males. That is, compared with the Census, adult males are slightly underrepresented, while juvenile males are significantly overrepresented. Of course, these conclusions may not be warranted since no *at-risk* figures are available for this analysis.

However, the overrepresentation of young males is in keeping with the stories that official and unofficial counts of crime tell us. The petty thieves in Bigstore share these characteristics with more serious offenders. Nettler notes:

Two of the most striking and persistent "conditions" associated with the risk of committing serious crimes are being young and being male. If one groups people by age and sex and then looks at their proportional contribution to arrest or conviction rates, the worldwide experience is that young men make higher contributions to crime than old persons and women (1978, p. 121).

The thieves caught in Bigstore again reflect the characteristics common to the criminal population as a whole. Thus



far the demographic attributes of the shoplifters are also those of the more serious offenders.

c. Race. These findings indicate that non-white minorities, of which Indians and Metis constitute the largest proportion, are overrepresented in apprehensions when compared to population estimates and an in-store estimate. Once again it should be noted that we cannot tell if this overrepresentation is due to differential surveillance by store detectives or to the differential criminality of these minorities.

The second part of the analysis of racial characteristics examines the role these characteristics play in influencing a store detective's decision to prosecute an offender. Although we find the value of goods stolen to be a factor in determining whether a shoplifter is turned over to the police, the analysis shows that racial differences persist even when this variable is installed. These findings are in accord with those of Lundman (1978). He reports that his research "suggests the continued importance of race in referral" (p. 400).

Lundman (1978) and Hindelang (1974) both use a different, apparently more sophisticated, method of analysis than that used in the present study: predictive attribute analysis (PAA).<sup>1</sup> The present study uses the simple comparison-of-percentages technique. However, analysis of the Bigstore data was also done using Goodman's





log-linear analytical procedure.<sup>2</sup> It was found that this technique, more sensitive to interactions between variables than PAA, gave essentially the same results as the percentage-comparison analysis.<sup>3</sup>

A major shortcoming of Hindelang's (1974) and Lundman's (1978) analysis is, in my opinion, the aforementioned insensitivity to variable interactions. For example, in the present study no sex effect on decision to prosecute was initially visible. This accords with both Hindelang's and Lundman's findings. However, after numerous controls were introduced, a very strong race/sex/age/value interaction was found in the Bigstore study. There were large percentage differences in the "under \$30" value category between white and native: 1) male adults (29%), 2) female juveniles (24%), and 3) female adults (18%).

A suggestion for future research on this question can be made. A promising analytical technique for this type of data is an extended form of Goodman's techniques. Although this is a complex procedure, the precision it provides in assessing inter-variable interactions should make it worth the effort.

d. Socio-Economic Status. Conclusions on this respect of the description of shoplifters are problematic. Perhaps the major value of this section is to show the *difficulty* one has in obtaining a reliable measure of social position from official or semi-official records.



There are some tentative indications that most shoplifters come from the less affluent core areas of the city. The data on income show that shoplifters come from areas where the average family income is neither high nor low. An age differential appears when the occupation of the shoplifters is examined - most of the juveniles are students while most of the adults are either unemployed or working in unskilled labour.

Combining these measures gives us a picture of the shoplifter, at least the adult shoplifter, as being in that amorphous socio-economic category, the "working class." This supports both the previous research findings on shoplifters (e.g., Cameron, 1953) and that on criminals as a whole. However, since we have no available measure of the predominant status of the Bigstore shopper, we cannot make any inferences about the over and underrepresentation of the working class in the apprehension records.

The conclusions about the socio-economic status of shoplifters are also confused by the high percentage (34%) of shoplifters who do not have a permanent address in Edmonton. The ecological measures are based upon those persons who have a fixed abode in this city. As a result, it seems reasonable to conclude that the findings on income are higher than they should be since many of those without a local address will likely have a low income.



e. Peripatetic Shoplifters. Further analysis of the characteristics of those without a permanent address indicate that a large proportion of them represent a group apart.

A less-dominant part of the peripatetic shoplifters is composed of persons having characteristics similar to those who have a permanent Edmonton address. This group, it is hypothesized, represents those living on a permanent basis in a rural or suburban community beyond the environs of Edmonton.

The second, larger, part is made up of persons who report no permanent domicile. We find this group to differ from all others along several dimensions: they take more expensive items, are predominantly male, and are jailed more frequently than those in the sample at large.

It seems reasonable that these transient shoplifters are the most likely to have the close ties to the criminal subculture that Cameron speaks of (1953, p. 32). For example, they are jailed differentially (indicating prior criminal history) and most have no visible means of support.

f. Theft Behavior. The theft behavior of the shoplifter appears to be heavily influenced by his or her age or sex. Males, as a group, steal fewer items of higher per-item value than women do.

When we look only at the value of what is stolen there is an apparent age difference. The juvenile shoplifter







seems to take merchandise of lower total value than the adult shoplifter does.

Actually there is a masking effect taking place - it is *sex correlated with age* that is producing the difference. That is, there is little difference between juveniles and adult females as far as the value of the theft is concerned. Most of the differences are due to the fact that male juveniles steal cheap items while male adults steal expensive ones.

These results may imply an evolutionary process in male stealing habits - that they start small and work their way up to expensive items as they age. We do not know if the *same* juvenile males stealing cheap goods steal expensive items when they get older, however.

The data also suggest an interaction effect between the shoplifter's age and sex and the type of items stolen. Shoplifters, within their respective age/sex categories, tend to steal items of a type they might normally *buy*. This could indicate that the bulk of shoplifters are stealing *for their own use*, again supporting Cameron's findings of two decades past.

## B. Deficiencies and Contributions

This section examines the negative and positive attributes of the Bigstore study.

### a. Deficiencies

The most important deficiency of this study lies in its lack of sophisticated analysis. The data are analyzed



in terms of differences of percentages. This method is acknowledged to be a primitive one.

However, it is my opinion,<sup>4</sup> that this method is the most appropriate for the Bigstore study given this study's descriptive theme and the characteristics of its data.

Two arguments can be made in support of this opinion. The first deals with the methodological difficulties manifested in the Bigstore "sample" and its concomitant population. The second deals with the possibility that the Bigstore data do not possess the independence of observations necessary for meaningful statistical analysis.

#### 1. Problematic Characteristics of the Bigstore "Sample" and "Population".

Mendenhall, Ott, and Larson define a sample as "a subset of measurements selected from the population of interest" (1974, p. 6). Further to this concept of sample, Hopkins and Glass elaborate the notion of *randomness* as it applies to sampling:

Before a sample will adequately serve as a basis for making estimates of population parameters, it must be representative of the population...random sampling of a population will produce samples which in the long run are representative of the population (1978, p. 185, emphasis omitted).

In the Bigstore study, the "sample" is not a random one. As you will recall, the Bigstore data consist of *all*



persons apprehended for shoplifting in that store over a three-year period.

Moreover, this sample may not be, as the statistical definition suggests, a subset of some larger population. It is impossible to ascertain the population from which the Bigstore data can be considered to be drawn.

In short, the data represent observations selected on a non-probability basis from an unknown population. The sample most resembles what social statisticians call an "accidental" sample. Kerlinger notes that

So-called "accidental" sampling, the weakest form of sampling, is probably also the most frequent. In effect, one takes available samples at hand: classes of senior high school, sophomores in college, a convenient PTA, and the like. This practise is hard to defend. Yet, used with reasonable knowledge and care, it probably is not as bad as it has been said to be (1973, p. 129).

The purpose of this study is to add to our pool of knowledge about the characteristics of shoplifters in a department store setting. This descriptive purpose can be fulfilled to an adequate degree using such an "accidental" sample.

One thing we *cannot* do, however, is make use of statistics in the analysis of the results. Even the most





primitive measures of association require that one have a sample that represents the characteristics of some population. Nie *et al.* point out that "*(a)s with all tests of significance, chi-square is strictly applicable only for making inferences from sample data to conditions existing in the larger population*" (1975, p. 244n, emphasis added).

Although there are a few indications that the apprehended shoplifter in Bigstore may resemble those caught in all large downtown department stores in Edmonton, this evidence is not of a quantity or quality to provide a basis for defining a population. The truth may be that the characteristics of apprehended shoplifters in Bigstore are unique to this particular retail outlet. If this should be the case, then the Bigstore "sample" is in fact a *population*. While one can describe the characteristics of these data, the use of statistical measures of association would be of no benefit.

## 2. Statistical Independence and the Bigstore Data

The fundamental assumption underlying a statistical analysis is that sample elements be independent and mutually exclusive. This assumption may be violated in the Bigstore study. If the independence assumption is violated, the validity of any statistical manipulations of these data would be adversely affected. Kerlinger notes



that

When research events lack independence, statistical tests lack a certain validity. A (chi-square) test, for example, assumes that the events-responses on individuals to an interview question, say, recorded in the cells of a cross-break table, are independent of each other. If the recorded events are not independent of each other, then the statistical test and the inferences drawn from it are corrupted (1973, pp. 107-108).

In collecting the Bigstore data, the researcher made no provisions for assuring the independence of observations. This means that the personal characteristics of a multiply-apprehended shoplifter could be recorded several times. For example, the data on sex, race, and age of shoplifters are of primary concern in this study. If enough persons have these characteristics repeated more than once, the analysis is adversely affected. The method needed to assure that no shoplifter has his or her characteristics recorded more than once would involve a complex procedure of comparison of names and then the comparison of data. The researcher judged the chance of such occurrences to be too small to justify the time and labour required by such a procedure. Nevertheless, we cannot be certain that our data represent discrete observations.



### 3. Conclusions

The two arguments presented above lend support to my contention that the comparison of percentages is the most appropriate analytical technique for the Bigstore data.

These arguments only apply to the more complex analysis of the study. The analysis which requires the comparison of Bigstore shoplifter's characteristics with some city or store population estimate is not affected. This analysis is such that, aside from previously mentioned errors in the Bigstore data and the population measures, analytical error is not a problem; the sample characteristics are either over-or-underrepresented in comparison with the relevant characteristics of the store or city populations.

The analysis that calls for the introduction of numerous controls, specifically that on the differential prosecution of offenders, is another matter. There is a risk that variables not considered in the analysis, or some complex interaction effect of the independent variables, are actually accounting for differences in the dependent variable. This risk is high when the analysis is as rudimentary as the present study's.

While analysis that calls for the introduction of but one or two control variables is easy to interpret using the difference-of-percentage technique, the analysis of prosecution calls for the simultaneous control of four variables. Interpretation of the results thus calls for





the use of a higher-powered technique.

#### b. Contributions

In spite of these and other drawbacks mentioned in the course of this work, several contributions have been made.

First, the findings of the study do present a picture, albeit a fuzzy one, of the shoplifters caught in Bigstore. These aforementioned findings are remarkable for the numerous similarities between them and those of other inquiries. Not only are the Bigstore findings largely in keeping with other research reports on shoplifters, but in many instances they are compatible with the characteristics of predatory criminality.

Second, this study's deficiencies and problems can be considered one of its contributions. Throughout this study the problems encountered in doing this type of research are emphasized. This type of study has much in common with other research endeavours that make use of official or semi-official records in an attempt to describe the characteristics of those in these records. By delineating the deficiencies of the present analysis it is hoped that knowledge for future research is increased. For example, I found past research to be deficient in its lack of the use of *risk-based rates* of comparison. However, this study has demonstrated the difficulties in establishing risk-based rates. It is clear that a methodology for acquiring this risk-based information is required if future research on shoplifting is to be more informative.



## FOOTNOTES

1. P. MacNaughton-Smith provides a detailed outline of this technique (Biometrics, 1964, 19: 364-66).
2. Leo Goodman's techniques are described in the *American Journal of Sociology* (1972, 77: 1035-1086): "A general model for the analysis of surveys."
3. The log-linear results are not presented because for accurate assessment, a more complex technique is needed. This sophisticated model of the log-linear procedure is anticipated as a future research project.
4. This opinion is supported by that of Dr. M. Gillespie, an authority on research methods and statistics.



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**B30240**